



# **In-Sites Annotated Bibliography for Workplace Literacies**

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# In-Sites Annotated Bibliography

*Sue Folinsbee and Judy Hunter*

## Introduction

### **Workplace literacy as a social practice**

This bibliography is for those interested in reading further about workplace literacy as a social practice. When we speak of literacy as a social practice, we see that meaningful communication through print is intimately interwoven with the social context. We see literacy much like a tapestry, where literacy practices are one thread in a rich weaving of other threads. Only when we examine the thread in the entire tapestry can we see the pattern. That context includes the social relationships and power relations among the readers and writers of texts, the previous experiences and mindsets that people bring to a text, their purposes in engaging (or not) with the text, their cultural attitudes, beliefs and values, the local and the wider social or institutional settings. All these are closely intertwined with what we see as “reading” and “writing”, as well as how and why people read and write. And because we see literacy as learned and practiced in many social groups and cultures, when we speak of “literacy”, we recognize many “literacies.”

Our understanding of literacy differs from the skills-related definition of decoding and encoding words, where the page or screen, or the setting is the context. In this definition, context is seen as merely background. In our view, the ways people make sense of texts and the choices they make when they write are more than background. They both shape and are shaped by the social context. We accept that people who read and write apply their mind to the task, but we see many threads beyond the individual and the print.

Although this social perspective on literacy is well established in school-based research, it remains relatively new in Canadian workplace literacy research, the focus of our project. That’s why we have produced this bibliography, as part of In-Sites, our three-year ethnographic research project. Our choices for this bibliography are only a sample of current theorizing and research in the area, but they have provoked our thinking on the In-Sites project. They have opened our eyes to richer, more complex visions of literacy, where people and social and cultural meanings are at the centre of literate activity.

### **The new workplace**

The setting for our research project has been what’s often called “the new workplace.” It is characterized by change -- globalization, restructuring, mergers, standardized quality control, and increased competition. It is also the site of increased demands on workers, more responsibility, improved literacy, enhanced technology and communication skills, greater flexibility, self-regulation and accountability, higher output, and consistent quality production. While these changes have often been tumultuous, those who embrace them are promised greater prosperity and success. In this context, with quality, production, and accountability measured and controlled

through many technologies of documentation, literacy has taken on renewed importance. Having a highly literate workforce is often seen as one of the essential ingredients for successful production and global competition.

Workplace educators, in response, have been energized and determined to contribute to the development of a highly skilled, literate workforce. Accordingly, the bulk of discussion, research, and educational development on literacy in Canada has centred on the development of literacy as a generic, transferable skill.

### **Challenging assumptions about workplace literacy**

Our project and this bibliography have taken an alternative to the skills perspective through a deeper investigation of literacy practices and literacy learning in workplaces. This selection of readings looks at print-based communication as integrally embedded in everyday social and power relations of the workplace. In descriptions of the changing workplace, the readings give voice to many untold stories. They challenge common-sense ideas of everyday lived experiences in the workplace. They call for a deeper understanding of the complexities of literacy and work than is apparent on the surface. Most importantly, they argue that print is interpreted, produced, and learned meaningfully only in the contexts of its use. How people understand and produce work documents as well as whether and what they read and write are tightly woven into working life, work relations, and worker identities.

In taking this tack, the authors in our bibliography run up against the underlying assumptions of the traditional approach to literacy as skills – which draws on individual, psychological models of learning and communication. In the skills view, literacy practice is a reflection of one's cognitive reading/writing abilities or motivation. Literacy assessment is based on an assumed correspondence between individual proficiency and appropriate response to texts. The social practice view of literacy contrasts to the skills view in its much broader scope of inquiry for understanding people's differences in literacy use. For example, readers may "misread" documents because their own purposes and contexts clash with those of writers. Instructional texts written by technicians may fail to capture key features of needs on the job. Completion of a job checklist for quality control may leave one open to discipline.

Because the social view of literacy and literacy learning incorporates identities, relationships, contexts, cultures, and power in a multidimensional framework for understanding literacy practice, it has often been criticized as political. But we would maintain that all these theoretical and pedagogical views are political, in a sense. That is, they have to do with power relations, either directly or by implication. However, the most dominant political views are often not noticed, but taken for granted as "natural". Then when some voices – as in these readings – offer an alternative to the dominant view of workplace literacy and speak out strongly, they can be singled out as overtly political. We hope readers will look for the arguments and message, for an enriched understanding of the complex dynamics of workplace literacy.

## **Focus of the readings**

The readings in this bibliography primarily argue for new, socially embedded concepts and frameworks for literacy learning and practice in the new workplace. Within this scope, they identify the problematic limitations of skills-driven approaches to literacy, and they advocate a theoretical reconception of workplace literacy. Their attention is generally not on pedagogical applications for the new perspectives, but on the importance of allowing this new perspective to alter our habitual way of seeing things. Their arguments focus on:

- why and how traditional skills-based theories are one dimensional
- why and how social theories of literacy account more fully for meaningful learning and practice
- what social theories of literacy entail

Many of the readings reviewed here are supported by ethnographic or other qualitative research on literacy and literacy learning in the new workplace. Ethnographic research involves systematic observation and interpretation of people in natural, rather than contrived, experimental environments. It attempts to understand the world through their eyes, rather than simply the researcher's. These approaches require researchers to understand the ways that people experience, make sense of, and act in their everyday lives, how they shape and are shaped by larger social, economic, and political contexts. When literacy and literacy learning are investigated as people experience them in the context of the new workplace, the results show a picture that is richer and more complex than previously presented.

A smaller number of readings in the bibliography are related to discussions of the new workplace, the overall skills approach to work, workplace education in general, language practices and language learning in the workplace, and pedagogical applications of new concepts of literacy. Although their content is not precisely literacy and literacy learning in the new workplace, we have found them to be sufficiently relevant to our project to include in the bibliography. We would also like to point out that while there is a growing body of literature on professional workplace writing, notably in Canada as well as internationally, the focus of our work is on frontline workers rather than managers or professionals.

## **How the bibliography is organized**

The bibliography is arranged in these two groups:

- research and theoretical writing on workplace literacy and literacy learning
- related writing on at least one aspect of our theme.

The readings in each section follow alphabetical order. Throughout, we have highlighted texts we see as key works with this icon ▲, because they are well known and quoted, because they convey important foundational concepts, or because they are highly accessible to a general reader.

## Workplace literacy and literacy learning

- ▲ Castleton, G. (2000). Workplace Literacy: (E)merging discourses at work. *Discourse: Studies in the cultural politics of education*, (21) 1, 91-104.

Australian: This paper clearly shows how a particular version of workplace literacy is "created" in the public domain. and then becomes the reality of many stakeholders working in the field.

The premise of this article is that current popular discourses about work and literacy create a common- sense, taken-for-granted, but flawed account of workplace literacy that is both virtual and virtuous. It is virtual in that although this reality doesn't exist, such an appearance is created through perpetuation of this "common-sense view." It is virtuous in that it advocates a certain moral order. For example, the current popular discussion cites workers, through their lack of literacy skills, as morally responsible for a country's inability to compete.

The author, reporting on her research to see how workplace literacy is socially ascribed, finds that government texts and stakeholder views of workplace literacy reflect this common sense way of constructing workplace literacy. Castleton supports the call by others like Hull (1993) to challenge this popular construction of workplace literacy. Further, she advocates alternatives to the functional context approach such as a radical pedagogy that includes worker voices and experiences as well as recognition of their own knowledge and practices. The article is well laid-out and organized, making it easy to follow the argument. It clearly illustrates how easy it is, even for workplace educators, to be co-opted into the dominant discussion. Castleton argues that this approach fails to consider a worker point of view, and she points out what role other variables like poor management practices play in lack of competitiveness or unsafe workplaces.

- ▲ Castleton, G. (1999). Inspecting the consequences of virtual and virtuous realities of workplace literacy. *Research and Practice in Adult Literacy*, 39 (3), 13-17.

Australian: This document will appeal to those who see workplace literacy as a social practice rather than just a problem of individual skills and want to challenge their thinking around literacy as solely a skills issue.

The author contends that "a particular so-called commonsense version" of workplace literacy found in policy papers and institutional texts has become the unquestioned, unchallenged discourse. In most westernized countries, the main thrust of this discourse is that poor worker skills are to blame for businesses' and nations' inability to compete in the global marketplace. A remedy, within this discourse, is literacy constructed as a "functional employment skill." Such a discourse, she argues, not only reflects the social reality but also creates it. Moreover, Castleton's research shows that views of management, labour, government, and workplace literacy practitioners conform to themes from these texts. Such a construction of literacy puts the blame on individuals rather than

institutions. She backs up her position that this dominant discourse is flawed with current, well-known examples of ethnographic research at the workplace (Darrah, Gowen, Hull and others), which, she argues, positively recognizes workers' ways of getting work done. Castleton advocates a workplace literacy pedagogy that reflects both the experience and voices of workers and reflects and builds upon actual social practices at the workplace.

The strength and contribution of Castleton's work is that she shows us how a reality around workplaces is created and how easily those involved in workplace literacy buy into a point of view that is unproven. She urges that workers' experience and voices be included in the planning process for workplace literacy programming, building on current workplace practices.

- ▲ Darrah, C. (1997). Complicating the concept of skill requirements: Scenes from a workplace. In G. Hull (Ed.), *Changing work, changing workers: Critical perspectives on language, literacy and skills* (pp. 249-272). University of New York Press.

USA: This chapter is a starting place for looking beyond "skills requirements" to a social context approach, to more fully understanding literacy issues in the workplace.

Darrah argues that analyzing work through the lens of skills requirements is a way of looking at people and workplaces that is not obvious or natural. Furthermore, he states there are consequences for leaving this conventional way of analyzing work unchallenged. He explores these consequences through a ten-month ethnographic study at a computer factory. The author makes a compelling argument for looking at how people accomplish work as a community of practice that is embedded in, not separate from the workplace context. His analysis identifies several important practices and contextual features that are interwoven with the accomplishment of work. The author's ethnographic research illustrates the fallacy of viewing skills as a toolbox that workers can take to any workplace. The most telling part of the research findings is that although management blames the failure of the team concept on poor worker skills, it is clear that lack of supervisor support and management inconsistency on the terms and rules for teams work to their detriment. This piece provides a powerful incentive for workplace educators to examine literacy within a larger social context.

Darrah shows the importance of understanding the workplace in all its complexities, and from both management and worker viewpoints, before labeling an issue a literacy problem needing a literacy solution. His work illustrates that it is often management practices and work processes that need to be upgraded to address issues that have been identified as poor worker skills.

Darville, R. (1999). Knowledges of adult literacy: Surveying for competitiveness. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 19, 273-285.

In this paper, the author "teases out" the different social purposes often associated with literacy efforts. For example, are they affiliated with democratic projects that focus on human needs or are they focused on competitive projects that see developing human

capacities as part of capital? He states that different constructions of literacy serve these different projects. Both these projects and their constructions of knowledge vie for a position on the public policy agenda. The author focuses on the [International Adult Literacy Study \(IALS\)](#) as a form of knowledge that supports the competitiveness project. This paper clearly exposes the underpinnings of IALS to show how it supports a construction of literacy as skill and information processing and how it is aligned with managerial interests. Also illuminating is Darville's point that although the definition of literacy used by IALS is broad to focus on people's lives, it never asks them about how they use literacy in their lives. It forces them to focus on the literacy of institutions. Nor, according to Darville, does IALS consider other ways that people successfully complete tasks within a community of practice or by avoiding literacy altogether.

Darville, R. (1995). Literacy, experience, power. In M. Campbell & A. Manicom (Eds.). *Knowledge, experience and ruling relations: Studies in the social organization of language* (pp. 248-261). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

The major thrust of this chapter is both why and how literacy workers might employ the familiar stories of their learners (narrative literacy) in helping learners to master another form of literacy from which they are routinely excluded, "organizational literacy". Darville argues that organizational literacy is a dominant form of literacy in public life that "is part of the power of those who have power" (p. 250) -- (p. 250) as illustrated in familiar texts like application forms, licenses, and laws. Literacy learners are usually familiar with how these forms of literacy exercise power over their lives. But most often they feel powerless to actively use such forms of literacy for their own purposes. Darville argues that a progressive literacy education would assist literacy learners both to understand and use 'organizational literacy' to pursue their own goals in personal and community life, as well as to oppose those forms of power they may want to resist.

Farrell, L. (1997). Literacy, schooling and the workplace revolution. *English in Australia*, 119 (20), 56-62.

In this paper Farrell uses her research in a textile factory in an attempt to make explicit some of the more complex, less direct relationships between literacy and work and their implications for teaching literacy in the workplace. She asserts that changes in literacy practice in the "workplace revolution" go beyond individual literacy skills and practices to include changes in expectations about what it means to be a worker. In her view, the workplace revolution "is about changing the literacy practices of workplaces, embracing the values, attitudes and overall commitment of workers to their workplace (p.58). Furthermore, she states that the significance of these interrelated changes is obscured rather than illuminated in the public debate, where the focus continues to emphasize individual worker responsibility for global competitiveness. This paper, written in easy, conversational style, makes a good case for showing how changes in expected worker identities and values are intertwined with changing literacy practices in the workplace. Moreover, the author asserts, teaching literacy as mastery of skills does not guarantee employment.

- ▲ Gee, J. P. (2000). The new literacy studies: From the ‘socially situated’ to the work of the social. In D. Barton, M. Hamilton, & R. Ivanic (Eds.), *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context* (pp. 180-196). Routledge

USA: This paper will appeal to workplace educators who question the rhetoric and language of the new workplace that promotes a unitary and rosy view.

In this chapter, Gee, a critical social linguist writing for an academic audience, discusses different “social turn” movements including the New Literacy Studies. He describes the movements as turning away from theorizing with a focus on individual behaviour and thought to a focus on social and cultural interaction. Although initially widely assumed to be “politically progressive”, many of the themes in the social turn movements, Gee suggests, have been co-opted by the new capitalism in the interests maximizing profits. He advocates “enactive work” (presenting meanings and values of the world in a way we want others to see it) and “recognition work” (others’ accepting or rejecting our presentation of the world) to take back these social theories from the new capitalism. The author says that it is necessary “for us to own up to our own projects and engage with other people’s – especially ‘non-academic’ people’s – projects at a variety of levels” (p.193).

The strength of this piece is twofold. One is the message that one must be aware of how themes in the social turn movements are being exploited by the new capitalism. The second is that the social turn movements encompass a wide range of current theorizing, not just literacy. They include, for example, theories of cognition, learning, culture, and communication. As workplace educators, we are reminded by Gee’s work to be cautious of whose interests we are serving when planning and setting up workplace literacy programs.

- ▲ Gee, J. P., Hull, G., & Lankshear, C. (1996). *The new work order: Behind the language of the new capitalism*. Sydney & Boulder, CO: Allen and Unwin and Westview.

Australian and USA: In this book, the authors examine the assumptions behind the “new capitalism”, or “new work order”, and the place of literacy, language and learning within this new regime.

The authors use a sociocultural approach to intertwine theory and practice to illustrate the impact, the limitations and the contradictions between the rhetoric and reality of the new capitalism. This book is directed to those who are interested in a critical evaluation of the new capitalism and the role of literacy, language and learning within it.

The first three chapters of the book are written in a dense academic style. They outline the authors’ theoretical approach to literacy and school learning, key concepts and features of the new work order – particularly “distributed, decentralized systems” --- and the underlying link to current mainstream educational theories. The following three chapters relate two case studies. The first is an American factory operating in the new regime, with an informative, illustrative account of the paradoxes of team work, as designed by the

company and played out by the employees. The second is the story of a cooperative factory in Nicaragua, with an analysis of its failure in the context of global capitalism. The book closes with a call to critically re-examine the core values and directions of the new capitalism, and offers educational directions for undertaking such action.

This book has several strengths. First, it provides a deep and clear understanding of the concept of literacy as a social practice through concrete examples that show how understanding of text is culturally determined and the need to think about multiple literacies. Second, it peels away the rhetoric of the promise of more meaningful work and democratic workplaces in the new work order to expose a business strategy that actually creates a small group of “haves” and an ever-expanding group of “have nots” across both the developing and underdeveloped world.

- ▲ Gowen, S. (1996). How the reorganization of work destroys everyday knowledge. In J. Hautecoeur (Ed.), *Alpha 96: Basic education and work* (pp. 11-31). Hamburg, DE, and Toronto: UNESCO Institute for Education and Culture Concepts.

USA: This paper challenges the management texts that illustrate the benefits of quality programs for workers. It also shows how assessment tools that focus on skills deficiencies can have negative consequences with respect to perception of worker competencies.

The author, through studies of two different workplaces, shows how shifts to total quality management and resulting functional workplace literacy programs destroy workers' competent communities of practice. This chapter is an engaging mixture of theory building and story telling. The author clearly shows how a functional, technical approach to both assessment and programming denigrates the wide range and complexity of worker skills and knowledge. The workplaces studied reflect and illustrate a sampling of literate practices that one associates with the total quality or “new workplace”. This piece will appeal to an international readership with an interest in critical and alternative approaches to basic education and work.

- ▲ Gowen, S. (1992). *The politics of workplace literacy: A case study*. New York: Teachers College Press.

USA: The book is highly recommended for practitioners interested in reflective practice. It is easy to read and covers the gamut of critical issues that a workplace educator can expect to encounter in doing this work.

This book reports on ethnographic research conducted during the design and implementation phases of a nine-month workplace literacy program at a southern US hospital. Gowen's riveting, readable, up close account of this workplace literacy program shows us very different pictures of management assumptions and worker realities. The dominant view of management and some program planners identifies the workers as deficient and needing step-by-step, job-specific literacy upgrading for their jobs. However, the workers themselves show sophisticated and relational ways of knowing, working and learning, and are insulted by the lessons in the workplace literacy program planned without their input. As long-term employees, they do their jobs well with

aspirations for improving their literacy skills that have little to do with their current jobs.

Moreover, Gowen's analysis clearly reveals that long-standing issues of race and class rather than lack of literacy are the real barriers to upward mobility for African-American workers at the hospital. Gowen argues that the approach to workplace literacy taken in the hospital is a narrow one, which fails to acknowledge social and political contexts. She argues for a more participatory approach to workplace literacy that includes workers' voices and experience. In addition, she advocates an asset-based, learner-centred approach. This book is an important piece of work for workplace literacy educators because it addresses every critical issue that they might expect to face in doing this work. Gowen's finely-grained analysis shows the fallacy of a step-by-step, functional context approach to literacy. The lessons from Gowen's findings can be extrapolated to developing a more critical approach to workplace literacy that deals with worker concerns. The book advocates participatory approaches to workplace literacy.

Gowen, S. & Bartlett, C. (1997). "Friends in the kitchen": Lessons from survivors. In G. Hull (Ed.), *Changing work, changing workers: Critical perspectives on language, literacy and skills* (pp. 141-158). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

The chapter examines the impact of sexual abuse and domestic violence on women's learning in a workplace literacy program offered to university maintenance staff. The authors, as course organizers from a white, academic culture, also discuss their assumptions about inclusive education, in contrast to their students' values and goals. They found that their beliefs about how African-American women would learn most effectively in this context were erroneous and presumptuous. So that other educators can learn, the authors expose these assumptions in planning and implementing this program, along with the students' reactions and ways of claiming autonomy. This work also focuses on a discussion about the intersection of abuse, economic situation, and literacy. The authors present a balanced discussion on both the healing aspects and dangers of abused women "gaining voice" through educational experiences.

▲ Holland, C. with Frank, F., & Cooke, T. (1998). *Literacy and the new work order: An international literature review*. Leicester, UK: National Institute of Continuing Education.

UK: This comprehensive book is highly recommended for those interested in a broad overview of the literature related to the "new work order."

The purpose of this literature review is to analyze current issues with respect to workplace literacy and the "new work order" in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The review also examines the implications these issues have for workplace literacy educators. The book is well organized into three major sections. The first section is a discussion of themes in the literature. It analyses current issues and themes of crisis and competitiveness, high performance workplaces, and the learning organization. At the end of the discussion on each of the three themes is a list of references. The references are organized according to social science theory, management texts, policy documents, reports, unions and current practice/guidelines. The second

section offers 120 annotations based on references in the essay, and the third includes a bibliography that is numbered to correspond to the annotations. This resource is a must read for anyone who is interested in critical perspectives on literacy and the changing workplace as it is the most up-to-date and comprehensive reference currently available. It is extremely beneficial to have the references annotated. The book exposes a gap between theory and practice in workplace literacy and clearly shows the need for more research on the link between the two.

Hull, G. (1991). *Hearing other voices: A critical assessment of popular views on literacy and work*. Berkley, CA: National Centre for Research in Vocational Education.

This report presents a critique of current, popular conceptualizations of literacy, work and literacy training provided to workers. In addition, the author asks us to rethink the nature of work, literacy and workplace literacy programming. The report provides a comprehensive, easy-to-follow critique and analysis of the current state of workplace literacy as well as alternative views of workplace literacy that consider worker perspectives. The paper's depth and the author's ability to lay out the complexities and contradictions inherent in workplace literacy today make it a must read for anyone working in the workplace literacy field.

Hull, G. (1995). Controlling Literacy: The Place of Skills in "High Performance" Work. *Critical Forum*, 3 (2-3), 3-26.

The purpose of this article is to critically look at the role of literacy within the "high performance" workplace. A high performance workplace is one that is described as giving workers more responsibility, and focusing on more communication, literacy and collaboration. Hull explores and challenges the popular paradox of the new workplace, where demands on workers supposedly exceed their skills level. She illustrates through her research at a "high performance" workplace that literacy plays a controlling role reminiscent of old style, hierarchical organization. The story of Ernie illustrates the lack of decision-making powers of workers and how literate practices are central to this lack of decision making. Ernie cannot alter an existing text even though it is wrong and must go through a long chain of command to implement his alternative solution. This solution includes a hastily written, hand made drawing which has no authority. Well written, with a clear logic in the development of her position, this article is a must-read for workplace educators working in the new data-driven workplace.

Hull offers some interesting implications for practice. She argues that although we can analyze a workplace text to see what grade level it is written at, this will not tell us much about the complex set of rules that govern the use of the text. She advises workplace teachers to make explicit the relations of power around text with their program participants and assist them in transforming the workplace's literacy and language practices.

Hull, G. (1999). Literacy and labeling. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 42 (7), 540-544.

This article illustrates how problems on the production floor that are labeled literacy problems or inattention of workers by management can also be attributed to particular social practices, policies and biases of the workplace. The writer takes us step by step through a problem on the floor of an electronics factory. She shows both management and worker views on what went wrong and provides an analysis of why the situation developed. This thoughtful, rich article based on ethnographic research clearly illuminates how the larger political context of the workplace, not workers' literacy skills, contributes to miscommunication and misunderstandings on the factory floor. Like Darrah's work, this piece illustrates the need for workplace educators to delve into the complexities, biases and politics of the workplace, before recommending a literacy solution.

Hull, G. (2000). Critical literacy at work. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 43 (7), 648-652.

In this article Hull illustrates how workers' use of critical literacy in the new workplace can bring about worker improvements as well as improve quality and productivity. The article describes and analyzes how one immigrant worker refuses to present quality and productivity figures because the standard time needed to do the work and set by the company was not long enough. The time is eventually changed as a result of the worker's insistence. Hull clearly shows that how workers use or do not use literacy at the workplace is related to power and social roles. This article is an important read for workplace educators because Hull's research articulately challenges literacy as a set of skills by showing the complexity and range of literate behaviours in the workplace and how they are connected to power, social roles and settings.

Hull, G. and Grubb, W. N. (1999) Literacy, skills and work. In D. Wagner, R. Venezky, and B. Street (Eds). *Literacy: An international handbook*. Boulder,CO: Westview Press.

This chapter examines how work is changing and the kinds of educational responses there have been to that change. The authors argue that although literacy requirements have increased in many workplaces, it is impossible to separate them out as discrete skills, as they are imbedded in work practices. They suggest that the educational response to these changes with a traditional "skills and drills" approach is out--of-sync with the reality of the workplace. This chapter clearly contrasts the dichotomy between the complexity of how literacy is used in the workplace and the simplistic, decontextualized educational solutions that are often used to address workplace literacy in industrialized countries. Particularly meaningful is the powerful conclusion of the chapter, which illustrates how literacy can be learned and applied in a meaningful way in context. The authors cite the story of women in Bangladesh who receive a loan to open a small business. By necessity, the women who are classified "illiterate" begin to engage in and gain facility with print. The authors suggest that there is much that could be applied from the lessons in this story to educational responses to workplace literacy elsewhere.

Jackson, N. (2000). *Writing-up people at work: Investigations of workplace literacy*. Working Knowledge Conference, University of Technology. Sydney.

In this paper, the author proposes an alternative framework to the skills discourse for “meanings-in-use” of routine literacy practices at the workplace. The author shows that literacy practices in the new workplace have changed from the past but argues that this has less to do with rising skill requirements than with changing social and power relationships. She applauds the contribution of those who examine and critique the creation of new values and identities for workers in the new capitalism. However, she asserts that we must also focus more closely on the actual working practices of front-line workers in the new data driven workplace to understand local meanings of literacy at work. Moreover, she emphasizes that understanding these local meanings within the hard, technical (“not-so-sexy”) side of management philosophy is essential for workplace educators to effectively do their jobs. This paper is provocative and innovative in that it suggests that progressive literacy education might include engaging managers and supervisors as well as learners themselves in exploring workplace social relations that are a barrier to literacy learning.

Jackson, N. S. (1995). Quality and learning. Who’s minding the agenda? Proceedings of the 18th National Conference of the Australian Council for Adult Literacy in collaboration with Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (pp. 51-59). Bundoora, Victoria: La Trobe University.

In this article the author discusses the broad social agenda that is shaping literacy and language learning with a focus on the concept of quality. She argues that present notions of quality which have their roots in industrial settings, do not operate in the interests of workers, learners or innovation. She suggests that the quality agenda is here to stay and that educators need to work to reshape this agenda to meet their own goals to ensure that basic skills programs are developed collaboratively, are offered to all, and address the broad workplace and social contexts in which they occur.

This stimulating critique of quality systems shows how easy it is to be seduced by the idea that “quality” conjures up something positive when really it plays out in the workplace as a system of standardization that results in work intensification and a loss of worker control. She aptly presents this popular practice of quality as disastrous for education where people learn at different rates and have different learning styles. Finally, the author’s call to action is to play within the game of quality, to reshape the quality agenda to ensure that workplace learning is innovative, participatory, inclusive and meaningful.

Nash, A. (2001). Participatory workplace education: Resisting fear-driven models. In P. Campbell & B. Burnaby (Eds.), *Participatory practices in adult education* (pp. 185-196). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

In this chapter, Nash offers a critical perspective on workplace literacy practice. Her work is one of the few pieces that connects the critical theoretical perspectives from the literature on workplace literacy to practice on the ground. She is highly critical of a functional context approach, asserting that it fails to consider factors that influence the success of workplace programs. She says that job security cannot be found in a particular set of job skills, and that there are risks to participating in employer-run literacy programs that may be used to weed people out on the basis of their lack of skills or education.

Furthermore, she asserts that literacy is not necessarily liberating, especially when work-related texts are used in the program that are part of workers' self-monitoring for the employer. She argues for a participatory approach that sees people as "shapers of their own world" and encourages them to look at the social forces that have shaped their options. She also distinguishes between a student-centred approach that is inclusive, and a participatory approach that is inclusive and critical. Although she provides several examples of participatory workplace literacy practice, she concludes that a participatory model is welcome in few workplaces and that practitioners are often only able to weave it in with more traditional approaches.

Young, C. (1994). *Asking new questions: Assessment for workplace literacy*. Albany, NY: The Civil Service Employees Association and the New York State Governor's Office of Employee Relations.

Carol Young outlines Project REACH's research project using an alternative assessment process that conceptualizes workplace literacy as social practice as well as critical reflection and empowerment. Project REACH is a labour-management partnership that offers a variety of basic educational opportunities to 94,000 unionized New York State employees. The accessible, thorough report includes sections on the history of the project, the need for alternative assessment, a theoretical framework, research methodology, findings, and conclusions. This resource is readable, thoughtful, and includes both theoretical and practical descriptions on four definitions of literacy and their implications for assessment. The report concludes with more questions about how to implement collaborative processes within the realities of the workplace and leaves the door open for more research on this question.

## Related readings

Barton, D. (1994). *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*. Oxford: Blackwell.

This book is an accessible basic introduction to the field of literacy studies. David Barton provides an overview of the competing definitions, metaphors and theories of literacy and the different ideas of what should be done about it. This is a starting place for people who want to follow the change in thinking to social perspectives on literacy across many fields of study, and for those who wish to become familiar with the vocabulary before starting some of the other annotated readings. The first three chapters of this book are particularly helpful in surveying the theories, metaphors and definitions of literacy. The book explains current literacy studies vocabulary including practices, events, roles, domains and literacies as a plural. Barton offers a theoretical contribution as well in proposing an integrated approach to literacy using an ecology metaphor, although this image has not been widely taken up.

Fenwick, T. (2000). Putting meaning into workplace learning. In A. Wilson & E. Hayes (Eds.), (pp. 294-309). *Handbook of adult and continuing education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

In this paper, Fenwick critiques existing conceptual frameworks for workplace learning and proposes three alternative theoretical frameworks for workplace educators to consider for meaningful, and ethical worker development. Her frameworks are offered in response to an HRD (human resource development) conceptual framework that she says is limited and reductionist and fails to acknowledge workplace power dynamics and social systems. Based on current theorizing across disciplines, Fenwick's frameworks incorporate needs of workers for meaning and purpose in their work, learning as a situated practice, and critical cultural analysis. Her article provides a thorough account of the problems with current worker development, such as the focus on the individual as a vessel for change, little time given to quality learning and the major focus on making workers more productive. She clearly connects the ineffectiveness of much workplace learning with the contradictions and alienation that people experience at work. Yet she also shows the reader an analytical path toward imagining what theory might look like in practice.

Fields, L. (1997). Impediments to empowerment and learning within organizations. *The Learning Organization*, 4 (4), 149-158.

The author examines the concept of empowerment through a series of case studies in the Australian manufacturing setting. He argues that empowerment provides challenges for both workers and management. Management may fear loss of control whereas workers may see only risk and no benefits. Using an accessible style, Fields examines definitions of empowerment and learning, and the links between the two. Contrary to most of the mainstream literature on empowerment, which presents a unitary view of the partnership between workers and management, Fields acknowledges their different interests. In the eight manufacturing sites under study, the author finds that there is a gap between theory and practice. A common theme in his data is that managers actually may also engage in behaviour that disempowers employees. As well, employees prefer to stay with the familiar rather than take on risks with potential blame by management or hostility from coworkers. Field's work provides a balanced and useful account of the reasons why the reality of the learning organization does not live up to the rhetoric by illustrating the challenges from a dual-faceted perspective.

Goldstein, T. (1994). "We are all sisters, so we don't have to be polite": Language choice and English language training in the multilingual workplace. *TESL Canada Journal*, 2 (2), 30-43 .

The author of this article argues that English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in the workplace that focus on job tasks and greater worker responsibilities can create liabilities rather than benefits for some immigrant workers. She uses her study of female Portuguese factory workers, where Portuguese is the language at work, to illustrate her argument. In addition, she advocates a critical ESL pedagogy. The contribution that the author makes is to show us that workplace ESL classes for immigrant workers who speak together in their mother tongue on the line can contribute to breaking down existing social relations for these workers by encouraging them to use English with one another. She also discusses critical ESL pedagogy for unemployed workers.

Goldstein, T. (1997). *Two languages at work: Bilingual life on the production floor*. NY: Mouton de Gruyter.

This book reports an ethnography of Portuguese immigrant women line workers in a toy manufacturing plant who study English at work but resist using English. Goldstein contends that “the social use of language must consider local contexts of economic, political and gender-based relations of power” (p. 244). Her study shows that the women tend to use Portuguese, rather than English, as the language of mutual help and support and membership in the local power structure of everyday work life. Portuguese is also used to call on the women’s values about community gender roles and to exert social control over them. English, on the other hand, is the language of management, of those who monitor and supervise but do not engage in productive work. Moreover, learning English does not ensure economic advancement, for the women’s low educational level generally makes them unqualified for job advancement.

Goldstein concedes that formal English classes to prepare these women for higher level jobs or English communication at work seems somewhat superfluous. Yet she argues for English that empowers women as mothers in an English-speaking environment. She also advocates a Freirian problem-posing approach to workplace language education, “enabling students to envision different working and living conditions and generate a ... response to problems of oppression” (p. 240).

Graham, L. (1995). *On the line at Subaru-Isuzu*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

This book presents the findings of a covert ethnographic study of work on the line at a new start-up Subaru-Isuzu plant in Indiana. Through her experience as an “associate”, the author illustrates that although the Japanese model of work differs from traditional automotive manufacturing, it does not deliver on its promise of a more democratic, egalitarian workplace. Graham argues that the Japanese model uses a hegemonic approach through attitudes and behaviour to ensure worker compliance. This is an important book for those with an interest in the Japanese model of work and workplace organization and culture. The book is an interesting and riveting read. It illustrates how “new approaches”, especially peer pressure, are used to ensure that workers comply with inhumane productivity expectations.

Hamilton, M. (2000). Sustainable literacies and the ecology of life long learning. Supporting Lifelong Learning. [On-line Colloquium ] Available: <http://www.open.ac.uk/lifelong-learning/index.html>

In this paper, Hamilton advocates a broader understanding of literacy as a relational concept rather than just a set of skills. She argues for a concept of literacy, referred to as the New Literacy Studies, which focuses on what literacy means in the communities in which people live and interact. She asserts that such a concept provides the foundation for a humanitarian approach to literacy policy and practice within the umbrella of life long learning. Hamilton’s distinction between institutional literacies (what literacy ought to be) and vernacular literacies (the lived literacies of people) is particularly insightful. Hamilton also asserts that IALS has become the universal truth for literacy and the framework for both policy and practice in industrialized countries without evaluation.

The New Literacy Studies provides a foundation for an alternative view for literacy theory and practice.

Jackson, N., & Jordan, S. (2000). Learning for work: Contested terrain? *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 32 (2), 195-211.

In this paper the authors provide a critical examination of the training policy framework across the OECD over the last decade. They examine whose interests these policies serve. Despite the appearance of a unitary consensual view among all stakeholders, the policies actually favour business. They state that the training policies put more control in the hands of business and less in the hands of unions and individuals. This piece provides a critical analysis of the impact of training policies and their service to the employer rather than the individual.

One can easily connect the underlying premises made by the authors to current training practice. For example, the narrow reductionist nature of training, the emphasis on soft skills training to create social identities in the interests of employers, and intensification of training focused on primarily business interests are all evident in the current reality of workplace training.

Keep, E. (2000). Learning organizations, lifelong learning and the mystery of the vanishing employer. Supporting Lifelong Learning .[On-line Colloquium] Available: <http://www.open.ac.uk/lifelong-learning/index.html>

This clear and easy to read paper reviews the commitment of employers to the concept of lifelong learning in the UK. The author illustrates that there is a lack of commitment to lifelong learning especially for workers, and that the learning organization is a rarity. The paper focuses on reasons for this lack of commitment and argues for a new policy approach to lifelong learning in the workplace that will encourage employers to engage with the issue. The author asserts that most workers do not have access to broad learning activities, that many workplaces still have routine forms of work organization, and that workplace changes are addressed through narrow approaches to learning. He suggests there is an emphasis on maximizing profits in the short term and that this puts the importance of workplace learning at a disadvantage. This paper does not present a nuanced view of the high performance workplace or learning organization as a continuum, but rather as an all or nothing situation.

Keep, E. and Rainbird, H. (1999). Towards the Learning Organization. In S. Bach & K. Sissen (Eds.), *Personnel management in Britain* (3rd ed.) (pp. 249-272). Blackwell.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the concept of the learning organization (LO) and its viability for providing a blueprint for an integrated approach to training and development within organizations. The authors conclude after reviewing the LO literature that the systemic learning advocated by the LO makes a key contribution to the debate about learning, skills and knowledge. However, the constraints of modern organizations make an integrated approach to training and development advocated by the LO an interesting theoretical construct rather than a practical reality.

They assert, first, that most LO approaches and theories take a unitary approach which fails to acknowledge the power differentials and different interests of managers and workers. Second,

they show that the language around LO theory is unrealistic and idealistic and out of sync with a competitive agenda. Third, LO theory offers limited recognition of the wider research on learning in the workplace that has taken place.

Lankshear, C. (1997). Language and the new capitalism. *The International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1 (4), 309-321.

This paper invites readers to think about how language and literacy are changing in conjunction with the “new capitalism” and the implications for inclusive literacy and education. Lankshear outlines the features of the new capitalism and discusses its influence on literacy and language. The article provides informative descriptions of the differences between the “old” and “new” capitalism. Lankshear asserts that literacy has been “profoundly commodified” within the current reform agenda. Lankshear motivates us to challenge an approach to literacy and literacy education that only serves the interests of this new capitalism.

Lave, J. (1996). Teaching, as learning, in practice. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 3 (3), 149-164.

In this accessible article, Lave outlines her underlying approach to social theories of learning. She explains the rationale for turning away from traditional, psychological models of learning that see learning as a universal individual mental process. Drawing on earlier research on apprenticeships, Lave challenges several traditional notions of learning. For example, she argues against the portrayal of abstract school learning as superior to other kinds of learning. She claims that apprenticeship learning does not just prepare people to “reproduce existing practices” (p. 151), but to become members of new communities of practice. She maintains that experiential learning can entail the creation of new knowledge, traditionally thought to be the sole domain of school learning. She cites evidence that the traditional notion of transfer of learning is narrowly conceived, and that skills learned in school settings are often quite different from the skills applied to so-called parallel real life settings. Moreover, apprenticeship learning is embedded in contexts of practice. By extension, the focus of educational research is more rightly on the learner than on the teacher and teaching. From Lave’s perspective, learning involves much more than acquiring skills or knowledge. It is, rather, a “crafting” of identities, a social process through which one becomes a more “knowledgeably skilled” participant in a community of practice. Those interested in theories of situated learning might begin with this article.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This book is a well-known source for researchers investigating learning as a social process. It is organized in three parts, a rationale and outline of the theoretical approach, five stories of apprenticeship learning, and an analysis of the stories in terms of the theoretical framework. In the first section, Lave and Wenger introduce their key concepts, that all learners are participants in a community of practice – a group of people who share activities, meanings, knowledge, and understandings about those activities. Learning involves the “process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice” (p. 29). Lave and Wenger refer to this “central defining

characteristic” of the learning process as “legitimate peripheral participation”, and in their view learners move toward full participation in communities of practice. The apprenticeship case studies of midwives, tailors, naval quartermasters, butchers, and AA members illustrate different ways that learning takes place as participation in communities of practice. Some apprenticeships are formal, some informal; some successful, and others not. In their final analysis, Lave and Wenger link several characteristics of the stories to features of learning as participation. These include refocusing the learning from the teacher to resources and opportunities for legitimate practice; participation as curriculum, rather than subject matter; engagement with practical rather than didactic language; becoming a full participant, transforming identities as motivation for learning; and the presence of conflict as communities struggle with both continuity and change.

Although this book is a theoretical monograph and often densely written, its tenets are central to much of the current discussion of what is often called “situated learning”. Moreover, the work-based case studies make it directly relevant to workplace educators.

Valentin, C. (1999). Challenging the corporation: Critical perspectives on workplace learning. Proceedings of the 29th Annual Conference of the Standing Conference on University Teaching and Researching the Education of Adults. [On-line]. Retrieved December 1,2000 from the World Wide Web: [www.scutrea.ac.uk](http://www.scutrea.ac.uk)

This paper examines whether there are opportunities in the new workplace for exploring more creative expansive approaches to training for humanitarian purposes, as opposed to just training for individuals that promotes the goals of the organization. It seeks to develop new ways of thinking about training practices. Much of what the author says reflects other critical perspectives on learning and the learning organization. For example, she asserts that language such as “empowered,” “critical thinking” and “collaboration” is used only in a way that furthers the corporate status quo and that employees can only be empowered within the constraints of existing power relations. Furthermore, she notes that organizational learning practices do not generally reflect critical perspectives but instead reflect a technical rational perspective. Her assertion that one might start with more critical organizational learning with managers is optimistic.

Although she says there might be a small place to explore how workers might be engaged in critical learning, she does not say how. She concludes by recommending that the critique of current organizational approaches to learning be continued, and that new, more critical theory be developed to ground practice.