Knowing a World in Common: The Role of Workplace Educators in the Global Production of Working Knowledge

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Abstract

In this paper I am concerned with the challenge workplace learners and educators face, as they engage with global economies, to create 'a world in common as . . . known in common' (Smith 1999). I focus first on why global companies need their geographically dispersed workers to engage with a world 'in common', and how they go about constructing such a world. I pay particular attention to the role of written texts in connecting individual local sites with global discourses of knowledge production. Next, I explore the roles that workplace educators play in producing and interpreting the written texts of contemporary workplaces to produce 'working knowledge'. I develop the argument that a critical dimension of the work of many workplace educators is the standardisation of language practice across institutions on a global scale, mediating local and global discourses to produce and use working knowledge. Finally, I discuss the political implications of the textual work that workplace educators undertake.

Knowledge and community

> Knowledge, thus conceived, is always in time, always in action, among people, and always potentiates a world in common as, once again, known in common. This account of knowledge and telling the truth represents them . . . as dialogic sequences of action in which the co-ordinating of divergent consciousness is mediated by the world they can find in common. (Smith 1999, p. 127)

Debate about the importance of knowledge production and diffusion in what is popularly known as the Knowledge Economy sometimes seems to imply that

knowledge is a fixed and unambiguous commodity, and the problem for nations, corporations, workers and workplace educators is to find ways to produce more of it. In this paper I am interested in exploring the role of workplace educators in mediating and regulating the production of working knowledge. It seems to me, however, that we get further in understanding the role of workplace educators in the global production of knowledge if we begin by acknowledging that, far from being unambiguous, what 'counts' as knowledge, in the workplace and in global economies, is always contested and negotiated.

Smith's conceptualisation of knowledge as 'always in time' and 'always in action, among people' invites us to think about knowledge as highly contextualised, dynamic social action. A feature of all social activity is that it brings together people with different experiences, different hopes and expectations, different ways of viewing the world and different ways of talking about it. It demands that diverse participants find or create a (more or less transitory) 'world in common'.

Very often, and especially when we are separated by space and time, we do this with words. The words we use to create worlds in common are not, however, common words. They have distinctive histories and locations in our own local or particular discourses. Bakhtin (1981) refers to this phenomenon as 'dialogic heteroglossia', drawing attention to the ways that discourses, and people, struggle with each other over what words mean. Words might seem familiar and stable but their meanings are always subtly shaped by the new contexts in which they are voiced. Words may find new meaning in new contexts, but those new meanings are always historically inflected. When we try to find a world in common (or when we try to generate a new community) so that we might generate new knowledge, we tend to do this with words. In transitory global communities, written texts play an important role in producing and mediating knowledge in workplaces, and workplace educators play an important, but largely invisible, role in mediating and regulating workplace texts.

The dominant framework for thinking about knowledge, learning and community in workplaces is the idea of 'communities of practice' (eg Wenger 1999). The argument is that knowledge is produced, learned and used socially in local (in the sense of specific but not necessarily geographic) 'communities of practice'. Communities of practice are self-organising 'collections of individuals bound by informal relationships that share similar work roles and a common context' (Lesser and Prusak 2000, p. 125). Defining features of communities of practice are their volatility and their autonomy. The trouble with spontaneously occurring workplace communities is that they are unstable, unpredictable and hard to control. On the face of it, it seems that, if corporations are to embrace communities of practice in order to generate the knowledge that drives the knowledge economy, they must give up a significant part

of the control they expect to exercise over their employees, the relationships employees have with each other, and the practices of work itself.

In an attempt to address this problem, global corporations like Xerox, The World Bank and IBM have begun instituting formal community development programs as part of their corporate Knowledge Management Plans, to create working relationships within their organisations that will generate working knowledge amongst employees – but that will also allow the corporation to harness and exploit such knowledge (Lesser et al. 2000). My interest here is to begin to investigate how corporations go about encouraging and building the communities they need to generate knowledge, to what extent they have control over knowledge generation in their webs of production, and what workplace educators have to do with it.

I want to use Dorothy Smith's (1999) idea that knowledge relies on 'a world [we] can find in common', to begin the investigation. In particular, I want to think about it in relation to the kind of 'knowing' that is done in workplaces, and the role that workplace educators play in mediating the dimensions of difference that we encounter in globally networked groups of companies, so that knowing and coming to know can happen. I think it is helpful to understand why formal and informal workplace education is increasingly concerned with text-based skills that, nevertheless, bear little relationship to the 'basic' literacy skills that have been generally understood to be the province of workplace education and training. My argument here is that knowledge warranted by organisations is always contested and always negotiated at the local level. In a global world, that negotiation involves the mediation of local and global discourses 'on the ground' at local worksites.

I begin by looking closely at the Ford Motor Company website for the insight it offers into *why* global companies need to find 'a world in common' and *how* they go about creating such a world and making it 'known in common'. I argue that it has to do with the importance of innovation, or knowledge production, in the contemporary economy, and the challenge of producing the right kinds of new knowledge in a business environment marked by what Smith calls 'divergent consciousness'. I use the website to explore the argument that, in this context, it is helpful to think about 'knowledge', as Smith does, as *textually mediated social action*; that the role of the text in mediating the social action is critical; and that a good deal of workplace education and training activity is, and will increasingly be, centrally about co-coordinating the social action of a geographically, temporally and culturally dispersed workforce.

Next, I want to take a closer look at the role that workplace educators play in constructing the texts that mediate the social action of dispersed workforces, and so

contribute to the construction of the kind of knowledge that seems to drive global corporations. When I talk about workplace educators and their work here, I draw on an interview-based pilot study (discussed in greater detail in Farrell 2002) of the impact of global discourses on the local work practices of workplace educators. The focus of the study was on the ways in which workplace educators intervened in the textual practices of work to facilitate communication across global webs of production. These educators included people working in Technical and Further Education colleges, people working in industry as trainers and as human resource managers, people working in training functions in trade and labour unions, and people working as Private Providers of training to industry.

Finally, I want to develop the argument I have begun elsewhere (Farrell 2001a, 2001b) that workplace educators play an important role in 'creating a world in common as, once again, *known* in common'. I will argue that workplace educators are operating as 'discourse technologists' and that, in doing so, they are contributing to the production of knowledge in companies. But this is not a neutral activity; knowing is a political act and it has political consequences.

Finding a world in common

My concern here is, first to explore why global companies need to 'find a world in common that is known in common', and second, how they go about doing so. Briefly, my argument is that any company that has pretensions of participating in a global knowledge economy faces the challenge of making and using new knowledge in a context where people work in remote locations, are animated by local values and desires, and have available to them a range of local and global discourses that will often compete with, and sometimes overwhelm, the discourse of the global company. Global companies recognise that routine communication between remote locations is their major challenge and they explicitly address it. Global companies as diverse as Xerox, the Ford Motor Company and the World Bank identify the controlled development of organisational 'communities' as critical to their commercial survival and success (Lesser et al. 2000, p. iv). Increasingly, the communities they are trying to develop are virtual in character: Computer-Supported Social Networks (CSSNs) with various configurations and purposes (Wellman et al. 2000).

I am taking the Ford Motor company as my example partly because it is indisputably a global company – in the sense that it has branches and supply chains that extend all over the world – and partly because it so unequivocally identifies itself as a global company participating in a global knowledge economy. The Ford Motor Company webpage provides us with some insight into *why* it needs to find a world in common and *how* it goes about it. First, I am interested in knowledge and knowing, and the way

the webpage situates the company as concerned with making and using certain kinds of new knowledge. Second, I am interested in divergent consciousnesses and the way the website explicitly and implicitly coordinates and navigates difference, especially the tensions between the local and the global. Third, I am interested in the way it uses and produces texts, especially the way it sets up a framework for 'knowing the world in common', providing templates for material texts that create a join between the local and the global (Smith 1999, p. 79).

Why a world in common? Knowing and doing at Ford Motor Company

The Ford Motor Company needs to create a world in common because its core business is knowledge creation, diffusion and trading, and because its workforce and supplier base is geographically, temporally and culturally dispersed. It must, therefore, manage knowledge creation in an environment that is marked by what Smith has called 'dispersed consciousness' (1999, p. 127). This is a difficult thing to do because knowledge is a local achievement – to 'know' something is to engage in certain kinds of social practice at a particular local (not necessarily geographically local) site. It takes effort for people who are not naturally part of a community to 'know' something in common, but if global companies are to survive and prosper by producing knowledge, it is necessary that some things, at least, are known in common – across the global web of production.

Ford Motor Company is, according to its webpage, centrally about two kinds of knowledge creation. The company introduces itself like this:

> At Ford Motor Company, we have a passion for Better Ideas. Whether pushing the limits of technology and design, or bringing people together within a community, we work to approach every challenge with ingenuity and caring. (Ford Online)

In this statement the company commits itself equally to two kinds of knowledge production: the technical knowledge production associated with technological and design innovation, and the social knowledge production associated with social innovation – 'bringing people together within a community'. It might seem at first that, while a commitment to technological innovation is obvious, a commitment to social knowledge production is more likely to be empty rhetoric designed to enhance Ford's corporate image. I want to argue that, to the contrary, innovation in the social technologies of the workplace is a pragmatic requirement of a successful global company; without it, technological and design innovation cannot be effectively utilised.

As a global company, Ford is faced with a significant and common issue: the people who work for it are dispersed across the globe; they are not – geographically, socially

or culturally – 'together within a community'. While this has real advantages in terms of efficient production, innovation and niche marketing, it also poses a particular kind of problem. Like most successful companies in the global economy, Ford views its major business not as making cars and trucks, but as producing 'Better Ideas'. It produces new knowledge in a global arena and trades innovation on a global market.

However, while knowledge may be traded globally, it is produced and used at local sites (Alvesson 1993, Davenport and Prusak 1998, Deetz 1995, Engestrom and Middleton 1996, Farrell et al. 2000, Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995, Smith 1999), within 'a community'. Thus, Ford is faced with the significant challenge of constructing 'a community' so that it can generate, access and exploit innovation. Somehow, Ford must manage to be simultaneously local (in a range of local sites) and global. Ford's website gives some insight into this tension.

Ford's *Heritage* page locates the company explicitly and unequivocally within the United States. Its history begins in 1903:

> The history of the Ford Motor Company is, in many ways, the quintessential story of the American Dream.

Henry Ford is presented as an American hero (you can access 'Henry Ford Quotes') and the Ford Motor Company is explicitly presented as 'the realisation of an American Dream'. Ford is unambiguously constructed as a *local* company that is centrally located in local mythology. Ford's Australian webpage also has a *Heritage* page, but in this case the history of the company begins in 1967 with a history of the Falcon GT – a car that was, apparently, developed in the You Yangs to become 'a Classic'. In Australia, Ford is also constructed as a *local* company, with local heroes, in a local mythology.

At the same time, Ford's webpage stresses the global nature of its operations. Ford's *Country Sites* webpage emphasises the global reach of the company. It invites us to 'Explore the World' by selecting a Ford website in a region (of eight) or a country (of more than 120) in which Ford has a presence. While these websites share a template and a corporate identity, they are designed to capture something of the distinctiveness of each location and of each market.

If this were the extent of Ford's global reach, then the procedure for coordinating diverse consciousnesses would be relatively straightforward. If knowledge is textually mediated social action, and if texts create the join between the global and the local, then Ford would need to produce common textual templates and train people in their use; policing textual practice might be an issue, but establishing legitimacy would not.

The diversity that Ford is dealing with does not end with its branch offices, however. Ford is typical of global corporations in that it outsources many of its operations. It relies on external suppliers for parts of engines, transmissions, chassis, fabric etc. These parts are manufactured all over the world. The Ford Supplier Network page gives some indication of the scale of the task of coordinating the activities of companies that have no direct connection with Ford, apart from the individual contracts they sign.

From the webpage, it seems that the most critical task is the sharing of information. It's a complicated problem. Revolutions in communication technologies mean that vast quantities of data and information can, at least in theory, be moved instantaneously around the globe. From a technical point of view there should be few problems in having a dispersed workforce and outsourcing network. Organisations rely on this instantaneous transfer of data and information to remain competitive. The data and information can only be used to produce knowledge, however, if the world in common is actually 'known in common'. People need to be able to understand and use the data and information at their local sites and they must be able to transfer it to other local sites in ways that other people can understand.

Ford recognises this problem as being about the social technologies of the workplace; about bringing people 'together in the community'. I want to suggest that the reason that Ford, quite pragmatically, suggests that social technologies and innovations are as important as technical and design innovations, is because it has learned that it cannot use the technical and design innovations it has generated if the social technologies of the global workplace are not in place. Ford's webpage provides explicit acknowledgement that, if Ford is to be an innovative company, it must create a world in common: it must create 'people in a community'.

How? Coordinating divergent consciousnesses at the Ford Motor company

Creating 'people in a community' is, of course, easier said than done. The vignette below presents us with an idealised account of how people involved in the production of a particular car might go about constructing a shared virtual context in order to produce new knowledge.

> A day with Covisint Collaboration Manager . . .
>
> During the product development process, a vehicle team receives direction from marketing to increase the capacity of a glove box. The engineering lead for the instrument panel is given the task to incorporate a larger glove box while maintaining functionality and performance. The engineer learns that the supplier for the glove box

> door needs to finalize the tool in three weeks to support the vehicle launch deadline.
>
> The modification requires coordination throughout the vehicle program team (engineering, interior styling, human packaging, testing) as well as the supplier's organization. The engineering lead estimates the change will take six weeks to implement with their current process – three weeks longer than the supplier has for final tool modification.
>
> The engineering lead decides to use the Covisint Collaboration Manager tool. He logs on to Covisint and creates a workspace for the Glove Box Modification project. Then, he adds team members, loads the marketing specification documents, and the project-specific documents, into the workspace. The team members are notified via e-mail and receive a URL directing them to their workspace.
>
> In the next three weeks, the team uses Collaboration Manager to review documents, conduct virtual design reviews, and assign and track issues. The team quickly reviews all design decisions and carries out various "what-if" studies. Through the use of Collaboration Manager, the designer develops a solution for the glove box and uploads the new design on the workspace. The design is approved and the supplier's tool deadline is met. (Covisint Online)

This vignette comes from the Covisint website. 'Covisint' is described on the Ford Motor Company webpage as a 'global, independent, eBusiness exchange for the automotive industry'. Covisint facilitates a number of different kinds of exchanges. On the one hand it facilitates the transfer of data by providing a number of applications that can be customised to suit individual companies and ensure privacy, while ensuring that appropriate data can be read across the field. It is, however, the second kind of exchange that interests me here. Covisint is explicitly designed to coordinate social action across remote sites. The 'collaboration manager', for instance, is specifically designed to create a world in common that is known in common:

> With the industry shift to outsourced engineering, program teams have become widely dispersed groups composed of members from different companies and geographic regions. In addition, product development cycles are shrinking. As a result, team members must have access to information to execute business decisions quickly. To co-ordinate virtual teams and make critical program information readily available, team members need to be able to collaborate effectively. The team needs one

> central source of information on which to base their daily business decisions.
>
> Covisint Collaboration Manager facilitates communication across corporate and enterprise boundaries. Collaboration Manager is an information-rich, cost effective and partner centric internet interface to establish collaboration among trading partners. Collaboration Manager makes the right information available to the right people at the right time – reducing friction in communication among teams. (Covisint Online)

From Covisint's point of view there are two intimately connected problems. The first problem is a simple one – it is concerned with the ready accessibility of data and information. Critical people, and critical information, are dispersed across space and time. When critical people operate collaboratively in virtual workspaces, they need a stable information base to rely on as they make business decisions as a team. However, while there certainly is a problem around space, time and information, there is also a problem about the nature of the social action generated in spatially and temporally dispersed teams. There is the problem of friction. The Quote Manager document (another element of the Virtual Project Workspace) also highlights interpersonal friction as a major problem – a problem that requires a highly structured collaborative process:

> The communication of the information between the trading partners is riddled with friction. To remove the friction from the sourcing process, buyers and potential suppliers must engage in a collaborative process. (Covisint Online)

It is not simply that common information needs to be made available to all team members simultaneously; the communication of this information between trading partners is 'riddled with friction'. The social action of the virtual workspace needs to be regulated.

The collaboration manager does much more than facilitate the transfer of information. It provides a template for collaboration; setting the parameters of a virtual workspace within which a group of people may establish the temporary community necessary for the production of knowledge. It does this by regulating textual practice.

Smith argues that the written text 'creates a join between the local and the global', and that this join, the text, allows the world to be 'known in common'. Others have also noted that the knowledge economy demands textually mediated or codified knowledge:

> The nature of knowledge, particularly the degree to which it may be codified, influences the ease with which it may be transferred between economic agents . . . the commercial creation and use of knowledge encourages the process of codification. (Roberts 2001, p. 99)

Elsewhere I have looked closely at the way that globalising written texts are taken up at individual local sites (Farrell 2000, 2001a, 2001b). In practice it seems that participants call on local and global discourses to interpret texts and so negotiate 'what counts' as knowledge in the local/global context (Farrell 2001a, 2001b). Here I am interested in the way Ford constructs a web of texts that are specifically designed to regulate social action, and produce knowledge, at remote workplaces; texts intended to promote, and to control, a world in common.

The website implies that the textual practices involved in using the Collaboration Manager are neutral; that the virtual workspace provides a convenient space in which geographically dispersed workers can share information and solve problems, as if they were together on the shop floor. In fact, the participants in the virtual workspace are socially and culturally dispersed as much as they are geographically remote. It is no simple matter to participate in the virtual workspace, and workplace educators play an important role in shaping the discursive practice of workers at remote sites.

Workplace educators' 'working knowledge' in the global economy

I want to now look briefly at the textual work of workplace educators, and the role it plays in creating and regulating a 'world in common'. In an interview with me, Jessica, who manages Enterprise-Based Education at an Australian Technical and Further Education college, reflected on some dilemmas her staff face in delivering a particular company-based program:

Jessica: It's called the Holden Quality . . . the Holden Production Certificate.

Lesley: With the Holden Production Certificate is there a requirement on the local Holden company to have a certain number of their employees go through that?

Jessica: All of them have to go through it eventually. It's been introduced in the last twelve months and only a few have been handpicked to go through it. These people have been handpicked thinking they are – because they're so bright – and Holden handpicks the ones that have got the terrific ideas because they want to get the ideas from them, but they're a bit shocked at the number that can't do, fill the requirement and they're being very rigid about that requirement,

> which to my mind – if the guy is able to stand up and do a nice presentation with overheads and stuff then surely that's enough, but no, if he can't do it the proper way he doesn't get the certificate.

Lesley: And the proper way is written in a specific format with specific headings?

Jessica: It's quite sophisticated.

Lesley: What sorts of features are required in that to pass?

Jessica: Well there's the graphs, there's all sorts, just anything that you need to demonstrate your solutions . . . and *why* we're looking at it and what *is* the problem. What's the extent of the problem? So they need to have tally sheets to show how often this particular problem arises – or perhaps Extract Reports. They would access all of that. They have no problem in that, but it's just stringing it together to make some sort of sense.

Like Ford, Holden is a global corporation, and the Holden Production Certificate is designed to ensure that there is consistency in the way employees conceptualise and talk about the problems they encounter. This is a requirement if computer programs like the Collaboration Manager have any chance of being effective. 'Problems' are a big issue in manufacturing, and there are a number of established textual tools (eg fishbone charts, 8-step problem-solving plans etc.) that teams and individuals are encouraged to use to conduct systematic problem solving. Since, more often than not, problems in globally networked groups of companies need to be solved by several people at different locations in different time zones, Covisint has developed a Problem Solver Manager:

> For every problem identified in an assembly plant, a manufacturer issues a problem case. In a typical assembly plant, industry experience shows that there can be anywhere from 15–50 problem cases issued daily. Extrapolating those numbers globally results in potentially over 3.2 million problem cases per year for the automotive industry. Currently, each case must be responded to in the manufacturer specified format. A supplier invests a significant amount of time and energy in the administrative tasks of answering problem cases. This time could be better spent in preventive quality planning to avoid the problems in the future.

> Covisint's Problem Solver tool provides customers and suppliers with a web-based means to communicate problems and prompt proper permanent corrective action plans from one central, individually secure, hosted location. The tool provides an industry standard methodology to respond to problem cases. Because the tool is based on XML formatting, each manufacturer can view the response in their specific company format. (Covisint Online)

Problem solving is knowledge production. In the global workplace, problem solving is textually mediated; it relies on textual practice that has been standardised in order to take account of differentiated consciousnesses – different people securely located in their different local sites. The standardisation of textual practice is seen as the answer to the problem of creating 'people in a community'. However, providing standard textual templates (like the collaboration manager) does not guarantee that smooth problem solving, or collaboration, will occur. Different participants bring different discursive resources to the text, and this will affect how they take up the standardised texts.

The problem that Jessica identifies in the transcript segment above is a familiar one – capable people do not all read and write in a single standardised way. They can solve problems but they cannot necessarily solve them through the textual practices offered to them in standardised templates. Jessica and her colleagues are charged with the task of delivering the Holden Production Certificate, a certificate that is designed to induct workers in Holden's Australian plants into the textual practices of the parent company. It is not enough, however, that they teach people to analyse data and make clear presentations. They must teach people to engage with seemingly alien textual practices – practices that do not make sense to the participants in the local context, but seem normal and natural and right to people at the centre of the organisation.

What I want to argue here is that workplace educators like Jessica and her colleagues are operating as 'discourse technologists' (Fairclough 1996). According to Fairclough, the global economy demands that certain people routinely intervene in the textual practices of local sites in order to shift discursive practice to standardised global discourses. This work is as political as it is textual. Textual practices carry the views and values of the discourses of which they are part. The material text is very important in periods of globalisation because, while traditional forms of control relying on proximity may not be effective, social relations can nonetheless be mediated and regulated textually by 'creat[ing] a join between the local and the particular and the generalising and generalised ruling relations' (Smith 1999, p. 79).

Discourse technologists are the people who create the join to which Smith refers. The key to their power at local sites is that they are understood to have access to special kinds of knowledge: reified knowledge that comes from outside the organisation. Specifically, discourse technologists research the discursive practices of institutions, design discursive practices in line with institutional aims and strategies, and train people in their use (Fairclough 1996). Workplace educators like Jessica, who design curricula in line with externally mandated certificates and programs and train individuals in the use of new textual practices, are prototypical discourse analysts.

Essentially, their function is to transfer the control of local discursive practice from local authorities (like experienced employees, managers and regulatory bodies) to global authorities (such as global companies and international standardising agencies). The relatively simple part of this process (because it involves the explicit exercise of authority) involves shifting the *policing* of discursive practice from the local to the global level. This can be done through corporate certification programs like the Holden Production Certificate and, more comprehensively, through international standardisation programs like ISO.

The more important and more complex part of the discourse technologist's role is, however, to shift legitimacy. While shifting legitimacy involves investing authority in a remote institution, it also involves obscuring the identity of the institution so that demands made by the institution are normalised, such that they seem transparently natural and right – just 'best practice'. Experts outside the organisation not only police discourse practices (by, for instance, providing forms to report faults or protocols by which problems might be solved) but, through that process, attempt to shape 'what counts' as knowledge and who can say so, to legitimise certain kinds of knowledge and de-legitimise other kinds.

This is not as simple a process as it might at first appear to be, however. Established local discourses can be both robust and adaptable. Local employees and managers often have a good deal invested in maintaining the values and relationships – and the constructions of knowledge and the identities of the knowledgeable – that are embedded within local workplace discourses (Farrell 2001a, 2001b).

When workplace educators intervene in the textual practice of work at local sites, as they do when they encourage people to put aside local textual practices and take up the textual practices demanded by the Collaboration Manager and the Holden Production Certificate, they engage in an ongoing contest over what counts as knowledge in a local community of practice, and who can say so. It is easy to overlook or minimise the power that workplace educators have in these circumstances. Global corporate discourses are necessarily homogenising, and they

can be monolithic and coercive as well, seeming to impose on local worksites not just a way of talking and writing about work but a comprehensive regime of work practices, work values and working relationships.

However, as Smith reminds us, knowledge is both a local achievement and 'a dialogic sequence of action'. Knowledge is negotiated, moment by moment, at local sites and in virtual workspaces, from the discursive resources (local and global) that are available – and workplace educators can play an important part in these negotiations. Workplace education provides an important arena in which these negotiations can be made more explicit and more transparent.

Conclusion

What I've tried to do in this paper is tease out what it means to find a world in common, and to know it in common, in the contemporary workplace. I've argued that it is a critical challenge for many global companies to create, even for a moment, 'people in a community' – when the people who might make the community are geographically, socially, culturally and temporally distant. I've looked at the role of the text in the contemporary workplace, taking up Smith's idea of knowledge as textually mediated social action, and begun to look at the way that the Ford Motor Company tries to create a community, and regulate social action, by mandating the use of certain kinds of texts: standardised and standardising texts that assume certain kinds of social practices and social relationships.

I've highlighted that the process of standardising textual practice is not as straightforward as it might seem to be; textual practices are not simply laid down or taken up, but incorporated into the various local worlds that groups of participants already have in common. In Smith's terms, participants in global webs of production have divergent consciousnesses, and it is no simple matter to coordinate them although, as I have argued, workplace educators often try to do this. This is why I think it is important to discuss the role of workplace educators in mediating the local and global textual practices of the globally distributed workplace.

The mediation of textual practices across global fields of exchange is a political act and has political consequences, although these consequences cannot always, or even usually, be predicted. For instance, while the textual practices and working relationships embedded in the Collaboration Manager have an impact on what counts as knowledge and who can say so in the global virtual workspace, they also have an impact at local sites. When a new discursive regime is introduced, established local formulations of working knowledge are challenged and long-standing working relationships and hierarchies are unsettled, although the specific outcomes cannot be

predicted. When workplace educators mediate the production and interpretation of workplace texts, what they do matters to people and organisations. It helps shape what people can know, what they can do and who they can be in a global economy; it begins to create, for better and for worse, a world that is known in common.

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