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Literacy at Work: The Functions of Literacy in the Workplace

Language is deeply entwined with the way we, as humans, interact with the world. Many scholars believe that language is not only a way of describing reality, but actually can create our reality as we perceive it (Gunn 5). It is no surprise then that in analyzing different workplaces, researchers often look at the acts performed there that involve literacy, a term that goes hand in hand with language. Lloyd describes literacy as “a way of knowing [a particular] landscape, in all its physical, social and textual manifestations,” (581). To analyze this landscape, I chose to look at the University of Toledo Medical Center, specifically the maintenance area and an Electrical Journeyman named Dean Weygandt. By conducting on-site interviews and observations I learned how both technological literacy and traditional literacy function in the workplace. These two components support the notion that literacy sponsors can control one’s position of power in the workplace.

Background

The workplace literacy project for my English 2070 project was assigned to study and analyzing how the workplace can transform the way people use literacy in their lives. The intention was for us to study work environments that we one day saw ourselves entering. Majoring in Psychology and Communications, I naturally gravitated towards those two fields. However, calls to the Communications and Marketing Department and

to some Psychology graduate students yielded no reply. From there I wondered what avenue I could explore. The more I began to think of careers that my college education could lead me to, the more I began to think of careers that I would never even think of with my degree. I began to wonder about the types of literacy practices that people with little to no college education deal with. I knew a good friend whose dad works for the maintenance department at the University of Toledo Medical Center; I knew that his perspective would be unique because not only is he a blue collar worker, but he also deals with the college educated people my interview was originally going to be about. Satisfied with this perspective to explore, I called him and set up my observations and interviews.

Dean Weygandt, a resident of south Toledo, has served the University of Toledo Medical Center for 25 years, holding four other positions before rising up his career ladder and becoming an Electrical Journeyman.

The amount of training and education Dean has gone through to get to this point, I must admit, at first surprised me. When I thought of a maintenance staff worker in the past I would not have guessed that they were college educated. However, Dean is not only college educated but has gone through training and education throughout much of his career. He got an associate's degree at Owens Technical College before coming to the hospital as an electrician. Since here, he has gone through an extensive learning process to know the ins and outs of every piece of equipment he is in charge of. For instance, every time the hospital buys a new system for the nurse call network or even buys a new brand of bed for patients, Dean is whisked away out of state to attend a week long training session in order to relearn how to fix them.

Dean himself has electively gone through training as well. Dean jumped on the idea to attend a class on environmental awareness for his workplace and received a certificate for it. In order to become an electrical journeyman, Dean went back to Owens Technical College (now called Owens Community College) to enter their assistantship program. In order to become a journeyman he had to attend classes and have on the job training with an electrical journeyman, all while still working for the hospital. Given Dean's extensive background as an electrician he was able to complete their four-year program in one year. All in all, Dean has assembled quite a list of educational credits to his name in the span of his career, one that is or could be followed by his fellow maintenance staff at UTMC as well.

The University of Toledo Medical Center, or UTMC as it is commonly known, currently resides in South Toledo. Formerly called the Medical University of Ohio, it was bought by the University of Toledo and now functions as the top destination for medical students in the area, providing care to those in need as well as educational experience to budding nurses and doctors. The first thing that caught my eye when I entered the hospital was its grand entrance, unlike any hospital I have ever seen. As soon as you enter the sliding glass doors you find yourself standing in a tall room with light stone tile, virtually empty except for a dark mahogany table in the center with a pot of flowers on top. Elevators align the wall in front of you next to an open staircase that leads to the second floor, also in view. High above the elevators on the front wall is a glossy brown seal with the letters 'UT' emblazoned on them.

The maintenance warehouse where Dean's office resided was quite different however. In the basement of the building, Dean's office consisted of three work tables

which formed a U in the corner of the warehouse. Other maintenance workers could be seen sharing the space, but all were far apart because of the need to surround themselves with the items they were repairing. Dean's corner of the room was surrounded by broken beds and electrical switches which he piled up in a crate beside his desk. The room had a constant hum as the generators and air handlers, also sharing the space, hammered on, echoing off the unpainted walls of the warehouse. It was almost the exact opposite of the entrance to the hospital, save for its size, and a good starting point to discuss the vast difference between the maintenance workplace and the rest of the hospital.

Superiors as Literacy Sponsors

Through my observation and interview, it was clear the literacy sponsor for those working for the maintenance staff in the hospital was one or all of their supervisors or bosses. Literacy sponsors, as defined by Brandt, are “delivery systems for the economies of literacy, the means by which these forces present themselves to-and through-individual learners” (Brandt 167). Essentially then a sponsor is someone who inspires or creates the literacy practices for an individual. It seems then that this role could only possibly be filled by the supervisor of the maintenance staff at UTMC. I say this because any traditional or technical literacy skills the staff must perform are direct products of the guidelines and rules upper management asks of them. Admittedly, I do not know if it is their direct supervisor who demands these things from them, a hospital director or board member, or some government regulation. While I may not be able to pinpoint exactly who the sponsor is, I can discuss the ways in which the individual in question sponsors their literacy.

Hands-On Literacy

Literacy, as previously mentioned, can be described as fluency in a variety of different topics. As part of the maintenance staff, their literacy is apparent in their knowledge of how to fix things. I remember witnessing Dean respond to a page about a broken light in a patient's room. When he arrived in the room he greeted the patient, asked what the problem was, went over to the light and tried to turn it on, then told the patient he'd be back later and left. When I spoke to him afterward he told me just by flicking the switch and hearing a certain noise, he knew exactly what was wrong with it, how long it would take to fix, when he would do it, and what he needed to fix it. Everything from how to speak with the patient to how to listen for the problem shows Dean's extensive literacy in his field. This fluency seems essential to accomplishing the job efficiently and effectively.

At UTMC, the maintenance staff must be fluent in a variety of things. However, each staff member specializes in something different, per the instructions of the supervisor. Dean, for example, is in charge of pneumatic tubes, fixing beds, fixing TVs, and fixing the nurse call system. If something goes wrong with any of these, only Dean is paged to fix it. While Dean has assumed a variety of positions since he began at UTMC, he and only he has been in charge of these systems for most of his time there. This results in workers highly skilled to do their job, while lacking literacy in their coworkers' tasks. While they have limited knowledge of other areas, most work can only be done by those in charge of it. In this way, upper management has created a workplace filled with skilled staff members working independently of one another. This would seem to contrast with

the nurses and doctors on the floors above them, who must unify and cooperate to tackle the medical issues they are faced with.

Dean's biggest complaint about the hospital is the failure of communication that results from these independently working staff members. He said that the hospital has created so many committees for specific functions that they aren't even aware of the other committees that are already created to do a task. "Parts [of the hospital] work really well, but parts, I, uh, use the analogy of one hand doesn't know what the other hand is doing. Take that one step further and I say that the right hand is in denial that the left hand even exists." He described to me a scenario where construction workers were renovating an area and completely removed part of a tube system that he was in charge of, and it happened because no one was notified that he was in charge of that tube system.

Traditional Literacy

When I spoke with Dean about how much writing he did on the job, he seemed confused at first. After some time to think he came up with two documents for me, one a work order he must fill out and also his timesheet that he must complete every day. However, as we talked more, he began to pull out various other documents which he must fill out frequently. He seemed as surprised as I was that he had so much paperwork, even though I recall him saying when I first observed him, "Paperwork is half the battle." Later on when he realized this he did confess that "It is important to document everything you do."

Dean's reaction is important to understanding how literacy functions in this workplace. As noted before, much of Dean's job is hands-on. Technically, their job is to respond to problems and fix them. Paperwork does not necessarily have to factor into this

process. However, not only is it required of them, it is “half the battle.” So why is paperwork so important in a workplace that runs on actions, not writing?

In order to better understand how paperwork functions in the workplace, I will first look at the kind of paperwork they are typically required to do. The most frequent paperwork the maintenance staff has to deal with every day is work orders. These sheets of paper are given every time they are asked to maintain or repair something. The forms themselves give a lot of detailed information, but the staff members know exactly where to look to find the information most important to them. At a glance, they can figure out what the problem is, where it occurred, if it is preventative maintenance or facilities maintenance, as well as many other things.

As mentioned earlier, these work orders are sent to them for every single complaint called in. If there is a broken bed in one of the rooms he receives a work order for it. If one of the pneumatic tubes jams in a tunnel he receives a work order for it. If someone believes their *TV is louder than it should be*, he receives a work order for it. Work orders for issues like this last one he puts on a clipboard for subjective problems, which he admits “I will never actually get around to doing. Not that I don’t necessarily want to, I just don’t have the time.” Not only does he receive a work order for everything that needs fixed, but if he gets a call one day and fixes it the same day, he will still receive paperwork to fill out the next day about it.

In addition to work orders, the other primary document Dean and his colleagues deal with is a timesheet they must fill out everyday. When I asked Dean how easily it was to learn to write these documents, he told me it’s “pretty straight forward. The hard part is the code. You got to know which code to put it under, because each code goes towards

something different.” Each code on the document stands for a different activity, and the employee must approximate how they spend *every minute* of their workday on it. The document asks how much time they spend on nonproductive things like washing hands or in the restroom, as well as how much time they spend walking in the hallway to get to their destinations. The amount of scrutiny they must endure is incredible. Every action they take must be well documented and kept on record in the hospital. Even before Dean had to fill out these documents there was even more scrutiny, as he had to manually take each work order from his boss so his boss would know how much he was getting accomplished.

Literacy as Power

At UTMC, it would appear that the literacy sponsored by Dean’s superiors shows an intentional hierarchy of power, with the maintenance staff at the bottom of the pyramid. The way in which the maintenance staff must work independent and be accountable for everything they do on the clock lends itself to the idea that they are inferior to the other staff in the hospital.

The workplace documents seem to act as a surveillance technique to assess that the maintenance staff are doing their jobs. Dean, an employee at the hospital for 25 years, must therefore report every minute of his day to his direct supervisor, who has only been with the hospital for two years. While I admittedly did not observe his supervisor or the doctors or nurses that also work in the building, I would be very surprised if they had to detail their day in a similar manner. Why then, is it so important for Dean and his colleagues to document their work?

For the maintenance staff, their literacy practices perpetuate an environment where they are second-class citizens in the hospital. Dean Weygandt, after working loyally for 25 years, is still required to prove that he is doing his job. He is not trusted enough to do the job he is getting paid to do unless he documents all of it. The maintenance staff is looked down upon by the hospital higher-ups, even though they are not that different from their more educated peers in the hospital. This is because maintenance does not contribute to the image of the hospital as the public sees it.

The hospital, like most hospitals, is trying to convey the image of a prestigious institution there to serve the patients with cutting edge technology and care. This explains the grand hospital entrance, even while the hallways of the hospital are the same bland rooms smelling of bleach. Even though the maintenance staff allows the hospital to run smoothly, because they are less educated and not in tune with the public image of the hospital, they are considered less important and are therefore subject to the greatest amount of scrutiny. Any failure of the maintenance staff to do their job results in the hospital wasting money on them and for the chance the hospital might not look as pristine as it is attempting to appear.

To be fair, it is possibly this record keeping and specialization of jobs is for liability reasons. If something goes wrong they need to know that knowledge of the problem existed before, or lack of knowledge, and need to know who to blame for it. This would increase safety and promote accountability in the workplace. However if the staff worked as a team they could oversee each other's work on their own. Because the staff is specialized they are unable to manage each other. While liability may in fact be a reason

for such record keeping, the need for further measures to increase liability is also a product of the decisions made by the supervisors in power.

Conclusion

Literacy for the maintenance staff at the University of Toledo Medical Center may take a variety of forms, but their origins all lead back to upper management. The rules and regulations of the supervisors or bosses at UTMC perpetuate a hierarchical system of workers in the hospital. This is evident through their drive towards specialization in the workers which creates a staff unable to manage each other or work together. It can also be seen through the timesheets, work orders, and other work place documents that the maintenance staff must fill out whose purpose is primarily to scrutinize the daily activities of the workers. The maintenance staff is under strict surveillance to make sure they are doing their jobs because they cannot be trusted to be accountable on their own. Once again, the hospital does not want the pristine image it tries to convey to the public be damaged. Even though the maintenance staff are essential in this effort, because they are supposed to work behind the scenes they are less important. The hospital, in manufacturing its image and ignoring the importance of the maintenance staff is “in denial that the other hand even exists.”

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