The Literacies of Youth Workers and Youth Workplaces

Sixteen-year old Jonathan Gregor had just started working as a grocery bagger when he was faced with what he considered to be a moral dilemma at work.

Bagger work is focused on manipulating physical objects and interacting with customers; the few text-based tasks they have are limited and involve such acts as running price checks, reading schedules and filling in simple forms. We could imagine, moreover, that an uninformed observer might see Jonathan’s sweep sheets and think of his work as being careless or ignorant. Indeed, these sheets could well reinforce dominant negative stereotypes of youth as workers: Look at how the youth of today just don’t concentrate on what they are doing! They cannot even fill in the simplest of forms properly!

Yet these kinds of approaches to reading and writing in the workplace would miss the sheer ingenuity and resourcefulness – as well as the structural constraints and political pressures – that shape Jonathan’s literacy act. Workplace literacy – for workers, educators and researchers alike – must be construed, as Hanna Fingeret (1994) has suggested, as a matter of being “literate about workplaces.” Literacy at work is about understanding “social settings” and “power dynamics as well as how, when, why, and by whom text is created and used.” Texts are ubiquitous in the youth workplace; and they are encountered and acted upon by young workers as sites of control, power, negotiation and resistance – and of affect, opportunity, utility, and meaning. In this column, I draw from a larger research project on young grocery and fast-food workers in the US and Canada (Tannock 2001), to discuss some of the ways in which workplace text and literacy impact the lives of contemporary working youth.

Youth at Work in North America

Youth in North America work – in large numbers and for considerable amounts of time. By the time they finish high school, over 80% of US and Canadian youth have held a waged job in the formal economy. Fifteen to seventeen year olds average about 18 hours of work per week when they are working. Both the percentage of labor force participation and hours of employment rise considerably as youths move into their late teens and early twenties (National Research Council, 1998).
Young workers tend to be concentrated in the low end retail and food and entertainment service sectors. Their labor has become a mainstay of mall retail outlets, fast-food restaurants, grocery stores, theme parks and movie theaters. The jobs they hold are commonly referred to as “McJobs” or “dead-end jobs.” Indeed, as an age group, young workers (ages 16-24) have lower wages, fewer benefits, less job security and are less likely to be unionized than any other age group in the workforce. Although their workplace concerns and needs are often ignored, young workers constitute one of the largest, most marginalized groups of workers in our economy.

Youths are not confined to low end service sector jobs because of limitations of skill or literacy. In fact, the youth labor market is the epitome of a continent-wide problem of underemployment – where the knowledge and learning capacities of workers exceed available jobs (Livingstone 1999). Youth are confined to low end service jobs in part because their participation in schooling limits them to part-time and temporary employment, and in part because these are simply the jobs that young people expect and are expected to find. Marginalized youth work on our continent has become naturalized as an accepted fact of life. Primary employers in high end industries tend not to hire teenagers, regardless of their ability or motivation. Youths, for their part, often accept low end service work as a rite of passage. Putting their dreams of more meaningful and engaging work temporarily on hold, they seek to create spaces of meaning, pleasure and autonomy in jobs that are often deeply limiting, boring, frustrating and stressful. Text in the youth workplace constitutes a pivotal site for negotiations between employers, young workers – as well as customers – over the terms and practices of work.

The Proliferation of Text

Youth workplaces, like most workplaces in our knowledge society, are marked by the remarkable proliferation of text. Most visibly, such proliferation has been driven by mass advertising. Grocery stores and fast-food restaurants are plastered over with posters and banners that announce the latest promotions, specials and savings. (Putting a different spin on what is typically understood when we talk of the “potential violence” of text, police note that the business practice of filling store windows with ad copy poses a direct threat to the safety of store employees by making stores less visible to outside passers-by, and consequently, preferred targets for armed robbery).

The special terms, limited time offers, and assorted “fine print” restrictions of ad campaigns lead to constant confusion among the consuming public. Young workers are forever having to explain patiently just which cans of soup are and are not included in the latest “two-for-one” deal. As with others who interact regularly with the public, some young workers come, through such experiences, to see their own literacy as being far superior to that of their customers. As one young bagger exclaimed in frustration: “If they would just read everything that was on the coupon, they would not have one problem! But they don’t! They go get it, it’s the wrong size. We have to run back and get em the right size, and then they don’t want it.”

Less visible to the public, proliferation of text in the youth workplace is also driven by employer attempts to maintain or increase centralized control over their employees, and over how work gets done in their workplaces. Fast-food and grocery employers issue rules, plans and schedules that seek to dictate everything from when and how janitorial duties are to be performed, to how much chicken or beef should be cooked at any given time of the day and day of the week, to how grocery produce racks and display tables should be laid out.

Hiring requirements present a revealing example of the tenor of employer control concerns in the contemporary youth workplace. In order to get a part-time, minimum-wage job bagging groceries, some young workers report having had to go through all of the following procedures: (1) Filling out an application for employment form and/or dropping off a resumé; (2) Interview with an assistant manager; (3) Second interview with the store manager; (4) Personality/integrity test (a multiple-choice test that asks youths to select an adjective best describing their character, to say whether they have ever done drugs or stolen anything, and so on); (5) Customer service test (another multiple-choice test that asks youths how they would respond to a rude customer, or to other such workplace scenarios); (6) Urinalysis (testing for drug use); (7) A test (multiple-choice) to obtain a food handler’s permit (required by state law for food service workers); (8) For workers under the age of 18, a signed parent authorization form and (if working during the school year) a signed school authorization form granting permission to work (required by state law for employed minors).

“I was shocked!” said one young worker, after having to go through all of these procedures. “My parents were surprised, too. My mother said, ‘Well, when I first started working at the Dairy Queen, you know, you just had to sort of show up to work.’” Not all young workers have to go through such an array of hiring requirements, however; in neighborhoods where the labor market is tight, employers are apt to let many of these procedures drop by the wayside.

Young workers, of course, do not submit passively to employer rules and regulations. From lying on personality and customer service tests when they are first hired – lying being the only way, young workers point out,
given the questions on these tests, to actually get hired – to manipulating floor sweep sheets, young workers are creative and agentive users of workplace texts. They are constantly coming up with “work arounds” to carve out space for personal autonomy, and to get work done effectively and efficiently (centralized work procedures, after all, are often woefully inadequate to getting jobs done right out on the shop floor).

Many service employers now create “customer service scripts” that specify the communicative actions, and even the precise words and turns of phrase that they want their employees to use with customers. Corporate headquarters attempt to enforce compliance with such scripts by sending out company spies to pose as customers in their stores (known in the business as “mystery shoppers”). But nonetheless, many young workers reshape such scripts to suit their own and their customers’ preferences. Some young workers, for example, refuse to “suggestive sell” or “upsell” to customers (to ask customers if they would like to add a dessert to their meal or if they would like a larger size coffee). Such aggressive sales tactics often irritate customers, and don’t fit workers’ ideas of what the ideal service encounter should be. Other young workers may “suggestive sell” as required, but in a tone of voice or with a facial expression that lets their customers know exactly what they think of such requirements. Some workers, finally, like to play with their service scripts, pushing them to the limit through comic exaggeration. A fast-food cashier describes a workplace game surrounding suggestive selling that two of her co-workers had come up with: “They’d suggestive sell the entire list of things! The customer is laughing at them. He’s [the cashier is] like, ‘Would you like this? Would you like that?’ The customer just went, ‘Oh, my god!’ They went through the entire list, every single thing, point by point. ‘Coleslaw? Macaroni? Potato? Gravy? Extra pieces of chicken?’ Oh my god!”

Youth, Work, and Workplace Literacy

The use of text continues to proliferate in the youth workplace – most recently through the embrace by many low end service sector employers of a variety of employee participation programs:

- One fast-food company has now developed an elaborate employee performance review program, in which each worker and his or her manager fill out evaluation sheets that rate different aspects of the worker’s job performance, and then meet to discuss the sheets and negotiate over discrepancies in their assigned ratings.
- Another fast-food company pulls entire crews out of their stores for a day-long program in which employees observe and take notes on work practices at competing chains, and then make oral and written suggestions on how to improve their own work performance.
- This same fast-food company has done away with a full-time managerial presence in many of its stores and relies instead on teams of workers to perform such managerial tasks as shop-floor supervising, writing schedules, doing inventory and ordering.
- A grocery company runs an elaborate incentive program in which workers write one another official thank you cards for “going that extra mile” in their job performance – cards that can then be redeemed for a variety of token prizes (a pin for 10 cards; a gold name badge, certificate and mug for 100 cards; a watch and another certificate for 200 cards).

As with all employer-generated texts and programs, young workers respond to such efforts in different ways: by turn, enthusiastically, subversively, inventively.

Overall conditions of youth work show little sign of meaningful change under the impact of these and other such increased demands for literate practice in the low end service sector workplace. Fast-food workers who participate in the joint worker-manager review program end up haggling over a 12 versus a 25 cent per hour pay raise on wages that start only slightly above the minimum. Fast-food workers participating in self-managing work teams likewise see little difference in their pay, increased demands on their time, and continued treatment as being essentially a disposable workforce. Grocery workers writing feverishly in the supermarket “thank you card” program can look forward to pins, cards, and watches as the symbols of their employers’ largesse.

What broader implications might we draw from this brief discussion of the literacies of youth workers and youth workplaces? First, we should reject the idea that there is little to be said about the literacy practices of low end service sector work. In our knowledge society, high end and low end workplaces alike are often rich in text, information and – although I have not addressed the issue here – technology. Second, we must reject the negative stereotypes of youth workers that are so prevalent in our society. Youth do not work in dead-end jobs due to deficits of skill or literacy: rather, their talents are underemployed in the youth labor market. Even in the most limiting and banal of occupations, young workers frequently show themselves to be extraordinarily creative, agentive and adept at handling texts and tasks, people and politics at work.

Educators would do well to work with young workers in fast-food, grocery and other such settings to help them develop their workplace literacy – but literacy in Fingeret’s sense of becoming “literate about workplaces.” Educators could build on the insights, agencies and demands that young workers already make in their day-to-day
working lives, in order to help youths develop a more extended and critical consciousness about the broader social and political organization of work in our society. Eventually, we might hope that educators and others could learn with young workers how to foster and develop practices, programs and projects that could radically transform and improve the all too often marginalized and impoverished conditions of youth service sector work.

REFERENCES