Searching for extended identity: the problematised role of managing people development, as illuminated by the Frontline Management Initiative

Llandis Barratt-Pugh

School of Management, Edith Cowan University, Western Australia

During the past year there has been considerable research undertaken to explore and evaluate the Frontline Management Initiative (FMI). The FMI is positioned in this text as an important initiative, because it marks the political move towards workplace learning, and provides evidence concerning the development of managing identities and the management of such workplace learning. This paper seeks to examine the FMI as a technology of identity within the discourse of enterprise, and as an instrument of the textualisation of the workplace. As such, the FMI is seen as a dichotomy; a powerful tool to promote elite representations of managing. In contrast, it creates learning spaces within which individuals extend their identity to include managing. FMI is thus positioned on the battleground for the development of manager identity. The paper concludes by identifying the diversity that is emerging from workplace practices, and indicating the critical and problematised role of people development managers as a primary future research imperative.

After the last AVETRA conference I stayed to explore Canberra, and went to the observatory. For the first time in my life I was able to see stars and other galaxies with great clarity. While I was aware of much of the associated knowledge, this was the first time I realised that what I was seeing was light that had started the journey towards me years ago, even before my birth. What I was seeing so clearly might not actually exist on that evening. It was a representation of the past. Peering into those galaxies, and back in time, prompted questions about my own identity. I was both part of something infinite and also insignificant. The concrete universe was full of illusion. These thoughts mirrored the stories of the managers in our current FMI research study (EFMI); seeking a meaningful managing identity within mixed and competing discourses. For many involved in the FMI, their experiences were like my first view through the telescope. It was the point in time when they began a complex search *for an extended identity*, that included managing.

The evidence from over 200 interviews and 500 questionnaires indicates that the FMI text has been subject to diverse interpretations (Barratt-Pugh 2000a; 2000b). Within some enterprises, the FMI appears within a discourse of flexibility, but is represented by codified national competences and regulated by managerial imperatives. Within other organisations, meaning is more defined by participants, often in a developmental partnership with wider management. Occupying the central space in the field of interpretation is the people development manager. The form that the FMI technology takes in each enterprise determines the space that is legitimised for frontline managers to enlarge their identity to include managing. This *problematises* the role of people development within the organisation, as positioned in the new pedagogic context of workplace learning. The move from ordering contracted training to developing systems of workplace learning places pressures on those individuals to re-examine their own identity and to consider integrating, a greater

emphasis on strategic capacity, local knowledge formation, and identity development.

Anchored to the evidence of the FMI research, this paper will explore the significance of the changes in organisational context, where the enterprise has become the dominant societal grouping, and where language has become a regulatory tool in the change from mechanistic to cognitive workplaces. The subsequent textualisation of the workplace is analysed to present the challenges of complexity and competition that are formed by the multiplicity of local and global texts. The paper then explores how the textualised workplace has become a battleground for the production of managerial identity, and the role that FMI practices play in shaping managerial subjectivity, focusing specifically on the people development manager as a problematised being.

Positioning the FMI

In recent decades, conceptualisations of the economy serving society have been reversed. Dominant discourses based on markets and using economic metaphors have attempted to position society as the servant of economics. These discourses, operating from a *market paradigm* and valuing enterprising actors, have privileged the work organisation and begun to displace the nation state as the focal societal grouping. Ways of understanding the world that are not based on markets have had increasingly limited currency, exposure and ultimately legitimacy. It was into such an environment that the FMI was dispersed in the late 1990s.

Du Gay (1996) suggests that this representation of the economy as the prime societal driver has embedded *enterprise* relationships deep into the social fabric. It is this discourse of enterprise globalisation that has problematised organisational life for employees - and more importantly in terms of our study - frontline and people development managers. Previously regulated in time and space (Legge 1995), the supposedly freed workplace actors are now asked to become *entrepreneurs for the organisation*. While they engage in a struggle to develop this new required work identity, managers are also positioned to regulate this production of identity. Payne (2000) suggests that the communities within enterprises organise, while this new enterprise capitalism actually disorganises.

The parent text for the FMI, the *Enterprising nation* (1995), may seem an overt servant for such a discourse, but one that also values diverse subjectivity and reflexivity. The report, (1995, pp 167, 169) is based on the development of a 'new enterprise culture' and implicitly supports 'a proactive entrepreneurial approach'. However, the text is clearly critical of the previous processes of identity production and managerial identity. In terms of management identity, the report discusses a 'changing paradigm of management and management learning', regarding:

> Skills previously thought of as soft ... [eg] vision, the ability to communicate, managing diversity in the workplace, engendering innovation, managing change.
>
> … a shift from traditional definitions, to one of team leader, coach and mentor. (Karpin 1995, pp 263, 40)

In terms of learning, the text (1995, p 263) notes that 'the term management learning is not widely used, and that there is an 'overemphasis on current rather than future skills''. The report (1995, p 263) makes a clear statement that values the benefits of 'learning from experience' and the value of diversity.

The parent text of the FMI is a key political component of the discourse of enterprise within Australian business and the development of enterprising manager identity. The text is, however, *critical* of past managerial identity and attitudes to learning, seeking to displace formal education with a learning technology based on the reflection of workplace activity. Ironically, it is the flexibility of such a framework that enables more sense making and partnership in communities of practice, but unfortunately also allows enterprises to regulate learning and identity development, determining what learning is legitimate. It is in this latter situation that managers, positioned as human resources, are subject to identity development in a similar resource-based, or acquisitional way. Their development is focused on acquiring predetermined patterns of being or self, and value adding them to existing identity, with little space for individual reflexive processes. The language telegraphs the form of subsequent processes.

Rhodes (2000) supports Legge's perspective that language derived from economic and knowledge-based disciplines has developed as a dominant way of defining individual subjectivity in contemporary organisations; a symbolic violence in supplanting the original meaning. Positioning workers as *human resources* by management prerogative constrains the opportunity and space for them to reflexively examine and adapt their own workplace and managerial identities.

The textualisation of the enterprise

> So it's taken it from having nothing to now having … policy and procedure manuals, fitness testing manuals, simple things like time sheets check lists, feed back sheets the whole regular run of the mill.
> (Frontline manager, EFMI)

Underlying the political change from an ordering and regulating management to an enterprising management is the change in the nature of work. The move from a physical workplace towards a *cognitive workplace* has meant that organising, as a controlling agenda, has had to seek new methods of regulating workplace activity and production. This has mediated organisational practices to move from ordering workplaces spatially and temporally, to ordering workplace text consumption and production. A consequence of this development is the textualisation of the workplace, where time clocks are replaced with performance management systems. The FMI is a significant text in terms of the regulation of workplace development and the textualisation of the work environment.

Gee (1996) asserts that language has become the primary tool of organisational control, ordering the knowledge production in the cognitive workplace, producing identity and access to networks. Knowledge work and workers are primarily engaged in the production of identity. The management response has been to develop a textualised management. This managerialism codifies not just boundaries

and direction, but stages of processes. Corporate managerialism with quality instruments creates an invisible linguistic electric fence, reinforcing the enterprise culture and encouraging self-governance, self-regulation and - most importantly in the FMI context - self-development. In textualising processes, or at least the parts of the processes that can be textualised, organisational relationships and identities are bypassed. The heart of the production is redefined by the *codification*.

But like language, the practices of the workplace are more than a set of rules for production; they are a way of relating and sharing meaning. Greater understanding is grounded in shared perceptual stimulations. Gee (1996) views such textualisation as a managerial control mechanism that excludes the community of workplace practice, and provides a pervasive system of regulation for the knowledge workers where empowerment is the new hegemony. It is a 'generalised form of governance, where knowing and acting are medicated by texts, and literate practices are the dominant means of exercising power and achieving conformance' (Jackson 2000).

For frontline managers positioned between competing cultures, meaning lies somewhere between symbolic management texts and the complexity of substantive workplace relationships. As Iedema (2000) indicates, 'more and more work is talk … knowledge as practice'. Frontline managers are confronted with manuals and procedures with augmented status - scripts to be read and enacted. The regulation of workplace practices demands the comprehension and interpretation of *complex texts*, and the cognitive capacity to resolve the ambiguities between such regulatory texts and current workplace practices.

The FMI kit, both by quantity of text and by using the exclusive language of competency-based training, is an example of the textualisation of the frontline manager identity. But is it positioned as a regulatory text, designed to achieve conformance and replace local managing knowledges? The FMI provides competencies; idealised, externalised, codified representations of enterprising management. However, it also indicates space to ground the learning processes in workplace experience and practice. If the filters of textualisation have removed the complex interactivity of practice, abstracting a generalised representation of managing, then here is the opportunity to re-examine and define individual identity within workplace community practices.

This dynamic tension between *global and local knowledges* reflects the shift from culturally concentrated knowledge (Gibbons et al 1994) to more transient socially distributed knowledge, because ultimately, the value of knowledge is determined by its performativity and not universal acceptance (Lyotard 1994). It is the prerogative of enterprise management, as the dominant discourse mediating the outcomes of the FMI, to place value on either of these knowledge components, competencies or local processes, according to subjectivity. *The political positioning* of the FMI as either a repository of knowledge, or as a framework for developing identity and local knowledges - where knowing is a social act of a specific context and of a particular time - will determine the subsequent diversity of organisational knowledge.

The FMI on a battlefield of representation, subjectivity and production

> (The FMI) Forces you to focus on what you are doing, look at how you
> manage and learn. (Frontline manager, EFMI)

Luke (1995) suggests that current management, organisational and social conflicts are about *representation and subjectivity*. These conflicts are about representation, because the new predominantly cognitive workplace is textualised, and concerned with what texts are produced and what texts are consumed. They are also about subjectivity, because identity and self are constructed by the way that individuals are 'named, positioned, described and desired' with such texts. It is a battlefield because, as Wallace (2000) suggests, 'it is these discursive practices that classify, characterise, observe, monitor, shape and control behaviour'.

How we are represented will influence and may determine how we behave. Control of workplace texts gives control of overrepresentation and therefore subsequent identity and subjectivity. So while the textualisation of the workplace problematises the organisational environment for managers through complex filtered scripting, and by privileging expert knowledges, it also provides the mechanism by which *identity can be moulded and subjectivity influenced*. It is the fluid framework of the FMI that enables management to make such Orwellian choices about which additional texts are attached to the framework, and how they position frontline managers and their role.

For many, work has become knowledge production. Knowing is a legitimate part of workplace activity where learning, once a peripheral activity, is now the core activity. Learning *is* production. Rhodes (2000) emphasises that in the contemporary workplace there really is nothing of an objective physical nature being produced. The primary impact of workplace activity is no longer on the body but on cognitive processing, where 'work is mediated through textual and not physical means'. Learning and knowledge production at work becomes a *commodity* in itself, not just a means of self-development. The fusion of leaning and work production has significant implications for development processes. As the organisation continues to strive for control over production and commodity development, it has to consider how to best align the knowledge and identity of managers and other actors with organisational goals, by regulating the texts that are consumed and the legitimacy of the texts that are produced.

Management discourses of best practice, flexibility and excellence provide a non-coercive technology of work, which shapes dispositions and behaviours (Harrison 2000). They are also technologies of self, constraining learning and shaping an enterprising, subjective being with autonomous responsibility (Fenwick 2000). This 'pastoral governance' encourages individuals to invest their identities in subjectivities and desires within 'knowledgable' discourses (Harrison 2000). To obtain the security of 'fitting in with' mainstream identity, individuals become 'produced' subjects. The quality control of mechanical production is displaced by *textual control of cognitive production*. The dynamics of human agency shape workplace texts, perceptions of knowing and ultimately worker subjectivity (Fenwick 2000). As the organisation is increasingly involved in the construction of idealised globalised working identity, the only legitimate subjectivity within the organisation is one where people are defined by such terms (Harrison 2000). Identity and self are regulated, positioned and defined by the organisation to the extent that

this identity is carried beyond both the location of the workplace and the time of work, creating a 7/24 being (seven days a week, 24 hours a day).

Positioned in this context, the FMI is a textual tool that can be woven within and between related management discourses to shape organisational meaning. Frontline managers exist in a textualised environment where learning has become production - and production identity. Their own identities, and subsequently that of their working communities, are being shaped by their FMI experiences.

Struggling to incorporate managerial identity

> Now I see jobs differently. (Frontline manager, EFMI)

More than 20,000 FMI manager participants have been placed at the interface between the understanding of local community and managerial texts. They are positioned as continual learners, extending their identities in a seamless enterprising environment of *limitless postponements*, where there is no final goal (Deleuze 1992)*.*

> I'm a lot more confident that I'm doing the right things (Frontline manager, EFMI)
>
> The [FMI] guys ... are seen to have ownership of their job and ownership of improvements and everything else, they get more of a communication flow between the two groups. (Frontline manager, EFMI)
>
> ... but, I'm guessing that it's probably not because of FMI that those things have actually changed, it's probably more likely the other way that FMI has made it easier for the managers to do it. (Frontline manager, EFMI)

Participants may have previously held the *name* manager; now they are positioned to develop that identity. Clegg and Hardy (1996, p 685) indicate that,

> Identity is a complex multifaceted and transient construct; to appreciate that individuals have multiple identities; that identities intersect to create an amalgamated identity. That identities are socially, historically, culturally, and organisationally constructed and subject to contradiction, revision, and change.

The FMI is just one of many influences designed to develop workplace identity, which may form a unified discourse or competing discourses, seeking to influence individual subjectivity. Olsen (2000) defines work identity as 'subjective assigning of meaning'. How a frontline manager sees the workplace environment is the result of a range of organisational discourses, and builds upon existing identity to produce a *new subjectivity*. The resulting identity becomes a 'subjective structural component' of the organisational societal context, with significant opportunity to mediate the development of local workplace community culture. If 'self' is a negotiable entity (Sheeres 2000), who holds the power in the processes of FMI negotiation?

Jorgensen (2000) suggests that the negotiation space consists of three intricately interwoven competing discourses. The resulting self or *Habitus* of the frontline manager can be seen as an embodied experience formed by the local informal communities of work, the organisational political communities that contest terrain to

assert power of definition, and cultural communities or lifeworlds. It is little wonder that the tales of the FMI are ones of diversity, where there are as many FMIs as there are participants. The evidence from the research project indicates that the intention to create a fluid learning technology has been realised. *Diversity is the most evident characteristic.* However, it is equally evident that the market environment has often privileged accreditation above reflexivity, and that developmental models of the FMI do not dominate the national landscape. Adherence to unified texts and the production of diverse subjects coexist on the battleground.

> I told her … maybe you shouldn't try to do it all by Christmas … It's not about ticking the boxes … you are going to miss out on the learning. (Trainer, EFMI)

Tenant (2000) suggests that the attraction of conforming to a management-prescribed subjectivity is an all too attractive proposition.

> … high value is placed on locating oneself within a shared understanding which despite recognition of notions of difference and diversity is more often than not a singular new corporate culture.

Jackson (2000) supports this argument, agreeing that textual mediation is a pervasive form of governance to mobilise these self-governing practitioners. In contrast however, Casey (1996) suggests that such constructions of workplace identity lack complete identity, because they do not account for *spirituality* and offer no revitalisation of the organic self. More sustainable cultures, identities and workplace identities need to be extended to include a spiritual dimension that is not just a cultural addition. Conforming to a prescribed workplace subjectivity is an inadequate platform to develop a *gestalt* identity. This positions identity as an implausible subject of managerial re-engineering that can be codified and textually distributed - as identity is processual, and subjectivity is a social production. It is the *social practices* of the FMI that develop; that culturally mediate new management meaning and new ways of coping - not solely the texts. This extension of managerial identity is more than 'learning' new ways or finding new meaning; it is also about developing the technology of the self, and how this new self-image will be propagated and policed (Devos 2000).

> … my 360 degree survey was very interesting. This highlighted some areas that obviously I needed to work on ... (Frontline manager, EFMI)

Current evidence suggests that such complex interaction does not take place in isolated, distant, brief or constrained learning opportunities. Without interactive learning space, participants do not achieve an integrated and *extended identity.* Limited interaction and coercive managerial discourses achieve little more than a value-added management identity, which can be discarded following accreditation.

The research evidence indicates that *discourses of partnership*, if substantive rather than symbolic, provide learning space. Rhodes (2000) indicates the inadequacies of 'dominant discourses on selfhood', which in contrast are liable to 'shape and delimit our context of the preferred self'. Dialogue, choice and self-reflection are practices that enable the re-examination of emerging identity and the related relationships. However, such processes of reflexivity are not individually but socially determined,

and the practices of the FMI are ultimately determined by those *responsible for people development* within the organisation.

The problematised role of people development

Orchestrating identity development from within the organisational framework is therefore an onerous task. As the first significant competency-based, workplace-located training initiative within the more 'open' Australian training market, the FMI provides interesting data to illuminate how structures of learning are developing within the new industry-led and industry-located system. The move from training to learning - and from ways of doing to ways of thinking - positions people development managers as problematised beings. Scaffolded by national packages, and resourced by management strategy, the people development manager (PDM) is subject to dual discourses of regulation.

In the analysis of the external market, Seddon (2000) discusses the construction of *pedagogic agency;* the fusion and management of pedagogy. Similar reconfigurations and capacity building are also occurring within organisations, as externalised knowledge acquisition is replaced with internal shaping and production of identity. The pedagogic context in which PDMs work has been radically reconfigured. Seddon, rephrasing Lusted (1986), has described pedagogic work as a set of moral transactions; a process of production and exchange between agencies. PDMs have to negotiate with groups both within and interfacing with the organisation to create a pedagogic process of exchange, where knowledge is co-produced and identity extended (Connell 1995).

> You know on the phone … my most usual response is *I don't know – what do you think?* (PDM, EFMI)

> I'd like your honest opinion … are we on a hiding to nothing … doing it like this. (PDM, EFMI)

It is a complex process that PDMs are asked to create, develop and protect, often with limited organisational power, and often with only symbolic managerial support. The FMI participants struggle to give some discursive shape and develop new meaning from the interactive processes they experience, but they need support *to link their local sequences of action* into a wider organisational discourse (Daly and Mjelde 2000). PDMs are therefore required to discursively negotiate with different discourse communities to facilitate this process, and prevent dominant and privileged subjectivities acting to define self and identity. The PDM role is positioned to protect the negotiation of frontline manager identity, protect partnership, and reject the discursive positioning of subjectivity by regulating the reading and enacting of scripts.

> [The] mediation of meaning between the individual learner and the "real" environment is a social act which, through language, abstracts the "universal character" of an object or discourse and establishes it socially as a real object, a real thing recognised as such by many communicating actors. (Smith 1996, p 370 - paraphrasing Mead 1938)

As Jackson (2000) suggests, the *protector of the process* needs to ensure that they 'are subject to, but not the subjects of, the workplace texts they aim to create'. As *discourse*

technologists, they develop knowledge as a local achievement through textually mediated social action and bridge the meaning of reified knowledge within local communities (Farrell 2000, paraphrasing Fairclough).

Mulcahy (2000) views the FMI as both a technology of knowledge, defining what managing is; and a technology of representation - defining how managers should manage. PDMs determine to what extent this encoded knowledge displaces the encultured knowledge of the workplace. In the more developmental models of the FMI, learning spaces may develop where participants are able to *contest the meaning* of abstract representative competencies with their own real world experience. Where these learning spaces are protected, the reciprocity between the texts and community practices creates new meaning and extends identity. Mulcahy quotes Law (2000) to assert that the resulting knowledge is a located societal enactment; 'knowing is a relational moment or an effect, not a substance'.

> … so corporate weren't going to get involved ... but when the managers started talking about what they were doing out there … there was a quick move … to get involved in it. (Coordinator, EFMI)

As discourse technologist and protector of a complex pedagogic process, the PDM is an agent who embodies the contradiction that exists between workplace realities and the regulating texts of management identity. The PDM has been positioned as the mediator of multiple discourses through: mediation of the hegemony of a competence framework with local knowledge construction; the enterprise-led move to a training market; the shift to organisations as the location of learning; the introduction of the specific focus on management identity and soft skills development; the focus on people as the key to competitive advantage; the broader context of work as the production of identity; and the move to a learning technology with national framework and local interpretation. This *orchestrates the production of identity* and displaces previous pedagogic institution. The PDM is thus positioned in a critical and problematised identity extending space.

Conclusion: a critical future research focus

There has been a political shift towards workplace-based learning as the organisation has been politically positioned to take on social power and produce identity. While the inadequacies of the traditional educational model are evident in the current context, the emergence of enterprise-directed learning processes, such as the FMI, have immediate implications for organisational actors, as they are asked to reinvent identity, and adapt subjectivity as a cyclic responsibility. By either supporting more managerial agendas, or in trying to create reflexive learning spaces, PDMs are positioned in a *problematised* space.

The position and practice of the FMI illustrates how systems of governance that have traditionally regulated the educational institution, constructed a supportive agency and developed pedagogic capacity, are now bypassed. Where traditional educators are involved, they operate in changed locations and relationships, dependent on enterprise benefactors. PDMs are asked *to mediate the discourses* of the FMI and package texts, managerial imperatives, workplace community cultures and

pedagogic workers. From this complexity emerges the extended identities of the frontline managers.

The evidence from the research project indicates that managers responsible for people development play a critical role in determining which discourses shape the learning structures of the organisation, and what social process emerges to extend frontline manager identity. It is these organisational practices and emerging identities that will subsequently shape a wide range of workplace learning processes and be positioned to shape subsequent identities. Rather like the novice at the telescope confronted with the complexity of the universe, support and community may be necessary to find new meaning. As the workplace develops as a pedagogic agency, the critical and problematised role of managing people development is illuminated as a primary *future research focus*.

Notes

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Contact details

Llandis Barratt-Pugh

School of Management, Edith Cowan University
Pearson St, Churchlands
Western Australia 6018
Ph: +61 8 9273 8775
Email: l.barratt_pugh@ecu.edu.au