Re-Doing the Knowledge

Labour, Learning and Life Stories in Transit

Abstract
This paper seeks to map out some of the conceptual territory which will be explored through an international study into the impact of the 'knowledge economy' on contemporary   forms of learning and life story telling within communities of labour located in different world cities. The paper begins with a brief critical overview of the main theories of economic and social transition which have been influential in developing educational and training polices aimed at the formation of 'new labour' identities. It argues for a theory of mediations between the local and global in which regional urbanisms and embedded actor networks, are allowed to play a key, if variable, role in defining and accessing transmissible knowledge in specific sites. From this starting point and drawing on some interviews from a pilot study in the East East End of London (UK), this paper considers the various ways in which workers confront the abstraction of labour form implicit in current regimes of transferable skilling. The paper concludes by sketching a possible theoretical framework for understanding the actor networks through which different strategies of learning to labour have been connected to grammars of life story telling, and considers the consequences of their weakening.

Starting Points
Many recent government initiatives across both the Western and post communist worlds, have been designed to combine education, training, employment and social policy around the notion of a 'knowledge economy' (Heijke and Muysken, 2000; Braunerhjelm, 2004). The rhetorical diffusion of this term from its origins in Silicon Valley USA, to a worldwide mantra for promoting economic growth, its concrete manifestations   in local and national government policy and in corporate initiatives constitutes one pole of our enquiry (Dominelli and Hoogvelt, 1996); the response this elicits from communities of labour on the ground is the other (Werbner, 1999).

Like all travelling theories which become global buzz words, 'knowledge economy' can means lots of different things to different people - it is often used synonymously with   cultural economy or even creative industry, for example, but in the public mind the term has become indissolubly linked to impact of globalisation and de-industrialisation – the double whammy that for many spells the 'end of the working class' or the end of what remains of the labour movement. Whether deployed to support an uncritical celebration of information, communication and design technologies and the 'digital age' - previously incarnated in an earlier fashionable notion of 'the information society' - or to engineer 'horizontal' styles of corporate managerialism or to signify the final commodification of intellectual work, and the emergence of a new 'creative class' the term is used generically to refer to a fundamental step change in capitalist development (Drucker, 1993; Florida, 2005). As such it has become strongly associated with the idea of a historic transition: from Fordist or command type economy, geared through highly regulated standardised forms of mass production and consumption, and operating with strongly embedded distinctions between control and execution, to a neo-liberal deregulated service based economy, driven by principles of flexible accumulation and specialisation, niche marketing and highly individualised forms of work and leisure (Beck, et al,. 1994; Heelas, et al,.1997; Piech, 2004). This account describes a new mode of economic organisation in which divisions of mental and manual labour have become weakened or blurred, and where performativity - the capacity to make things happen by virtue of purely discursive activity - has become the key measure of performance (Ball, 1999).

This shift is often correlated with a set of quasi-moral distinctions between 'old labour' immobilised in outmoded and highly localised forms of masculinity, job ownership and mechanical solidarity, and 'new labour' adapted to more feminised, mobile, and multicultural forms of work identity and practice (Cara, et al., 1999). In the strong and most reductionist version of the thesis these changes in economic life are held to have produced similar transformations in the social, cultural and political spheres - to have produced a 'post-Fordist city' or a 'neo-liberal subject' corresponding to a generic condition of 'reflexive modernity' or a post modern 'culture based' society (Heelas, et al., 1997; Lash, 1999). It becomes the task of governance and education to encourage both young and older workers to adopt the dispositions of flexibility, self invention and lifelong learning presumed to be required (DfEE,1998, 1999).

Theory in Transit

Most of the research that has been carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of these policies, has remained within the problematics of correspondence theory reminiscent of earlier Marxist theorising ("How to make the ideological superstructures and training apparatuses 'fit' the new emerging mode of production?") or structural-functionalist social engineering type reformism. The latter views Fordist labour practices in purely negative terms as representing pathological reaction on the part of archaic or residual communities of practice: alternatively, on the left, these practices are hyper-valorised as a site of heroic resistance in which an invented tradition of solidarity is somehow hitched to the conservative or nostalgic values of religion, race or nation, in order to compensate for the loss of real or imagined powers of social(ist) combination (Munt, 2000).

Whatever their ideological inflection, correspondence theories are premised on a model of 'post-industrialization' as a linear process of transition between two discrete orders of political and moral economy; from communism to capitalism in Eastern Europe, or from Fordism to post-Fordism in the West. Ideal typologies are constructed in which a common set of distinctive features are assigned to each 'regime', lined up in a series of binary oppositions, distributed uniformly across all its levels or sites. This kind of schematics has largely set the terms of public and academic debate about globalisation and/or the knowledge economy: on one side those who 'go with the flow' and argue that workers and consumers have been emancipated from the tyrannies of mass society (in both its ideological versions), inaugurating a more freewheeling, individually rewarding life style for all (Drucker, 1993; Landry, 2000). On the other side, there are those who argue that such changes are purely cosmetic and benefit only a small cultural elite; as such they are seen to be part of a re-branding exercise designed to conceal the deepening of capitalist exploitation and state bureaucracy under the cover of 'creativity' or democratisation (Frank, 1998). In one version of the thesis, the effect is to create a profound 'corrosion of character' in which both structures of fellow feeling and civic engagement are abandoned or hollowed out, in favour of pursuing a 'narcissism of minor differences' (Sennett, 1995; Putnam, 2000). Alternatively, the notion of a 'new economy' is dismissed as a pure myth, enabling previous concepts of both methodology and policy to remain unchanged (Dolby, 2004).

Underpinning correspondence models of transition, is the notion of historical convergence which sees globalisation as a process of homogenisation which either

erases local cultural and ideological differences, or throws up purely reactive forms of localism bound up with the assertion of exclusionary prides of place (Appadurai, 1996). Two things follow from this reading: first, it is assumed that we already know all that we need to know about the variety (or homogeneity) of locally situated knowledge that is at stake. Secondly, the local is reified as an immovable object in a way which makes globalisation seem even more of an irresistible force than it is (Eade, 1997). For this purpose many such accounts draw selectively on snapshots of a single occupational or age group, usually young professionals located in the advanced hi-tech sectors of western European economies, whose behaviour is then used as the basis for sweeping generalizations about the impact of digital technologies, or the 'network society' and their putative forms of subjectivity (Leadbetter, 1999; Landry and Ransom, 1999). Invariably such studies tend to reinforce stereotypical assumptions about agencies of change, for example, portraying the older generation or non professionals as clinging stubbornly to outdated practices and values and hence functioning as impediments to progress, whilst the young educated middle class set the pace. More careful studies however not only show up many exceptions to this rule, but put in question a model of innovation and change which is based on such a whiggish or neo-liberal interpretation of economic and political history (Smith, 2002).

We need to put such catch all explanations under sustained empirical pressure, using an expanded repertoire of methods to do so. For this purpose we need to begin to think of transitions/transformations in a rather different way: not as a one way albeit an uneven shift from A to B, but as an iterative series of site specific transits in which discontinuous trajectories of economic, social, cultural and political change, each moving at different speeds and possibly in different directions, are negotiated and made sense of by specifically located groups in particular sites and through a range of practices.

A transit is a navigational device which lines up a series of points (or 'moments') in order to enable the navigator cum narrator to get a fix or bearing on a rapidly shifting landscape and hence produce a relatively coherent account of complex processes of change. In terms of communities of practice the key navigational devices may be of various kinds: a story, or conversation, a practical demonstration, a diagram. The device draws together elements of knowledge, skill and identity, which are embedded, elaborated or mutating in particular settings of transmission in order to either accomplish the transfer of competencies between different spheres (vis formal training and informal learning, or bodily techniques and social competences), or hold these spheres in some kind of creative tension (Cohen, 1999).

Potentially, this model offers a more grounded account of the conditions of variation which govern the 'double whammy' than is allowed for by functionalist or teleological explanations. In particular it enables us to challenge the conflation of de-industrialisation and globalisation and the assumption behind so much policy, that strategies designed to mitigate one and promote the other produce complimentary benefits. The practical consequences of such policy assumptions can often be disastrous. One key example of this is the way many regeneration initiatives in depressed areas have fuelled the process of gentrification with the result that both jobs and housing are put beyond the reach of local working class families, who are then forced to move out into areas where accommodation in both senses of the term,

is more affordable but access to real opportunity structures are more difficult (Butler and Rustin, 1996, 2000).

Mediations

To understand such effects we need to introduce two major intervening variables which are normally bracketed out of studies of globalisation. Firstly, the worldwide growth of metropolitan regions, each with their own distinctive histories of migration and settlement, their geographies of inclusion and exclusion, intimately shapes the conduits through which educational, training and regeneration policies are formulated and implemented and the fate of disadvantaged groups decided (Castells, 2002; Massey, 1995; Allen et al., 1998). For example, the transformation of ports into tourism and heritage centres, the creation of edge cities or mega slums, the phenomenon of suburban flight and sprawl, shape the local framework of urban education in very different ways (Soja, 2000; Soderband and Shaw 2003) .

Secondly, we need to stress the continued importance of social and cultural capital transmitted through dispersed family, peer group and community networks, operating both virtually and face to face, in generating actor networks for many types of knowledge transmission and elaboration (Graham and Marvin, 2002; Savage et al., 2005).

In highlighting these two dimensions of comparison, the research is also committed to pushing at the boundaries of some of the local sociologies which have traditionally circled around these issues without properly engaging with them. For example, the classical sociology of knowledge has been largely concerned with the problem of intellectuals, of ideology and the construction of scientific knowledge. It is only just beginning to consider those forms of tacit or taken for granted knowledge embedded in social networks, or the role of amateur knowledge and the culture of popular curiosity (Woolgar, 1991). The sociology of education has likewise focussed on the organisation and transmission of official knowledge via curriculum and pedagogy, and only belatedly begun to grapple with informal cultures of learning (Apple 1993; Bentley, 1998; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990, Ainley and Rainbird, 1999). Meanwhile the sociology of work has largely confined itself to studies of the immediate labour process, the impact of new technologies on skilling and working practices or the behaviour of the individual enterprise (DTI, 1999). The wider considerations have been left to sociologists of class, gender and race, (and their intersection), and here, we have suggested, functionalist and teleological explanations have tended to hold sway.

The recent narrative and spatial turns in the social sciences have provided some of the missing links between these research literatures. In particular they allow us to combine the methodological approaches of multi-site ethnography and multi-generation life-history interviews in order to obtain a much richer, and more clearly differentiated picture of the patterns of de and re-routing of knowledge-transmission and its communities of practice. This in turn may yield a more grounded theory of globalisation, focussing on its variable local impacts on key groups: trainees and students, manual workers and 'knowledge' workers, established immigrants and new arrivants, voluntary retirees, and the long term unemployed, the 'successes' and the 'failures'. A move then against the general de-contextualising of the account which in so many ways mirrors the hollowing out of the labour process itself.

Learning to Labour in the age of Global Circulation
Recent studies of 'intellectual capital' have emphasised the fact that the direct forms of knowledge which used to be embodied concretely, in what Marx called the collective worker and transmitted largely informally and inter- generationally through the immediate relations of workplace cultures, are now being replaced or transformed by means of information and communication technologies (ICT) into entirely mediated ways of 'learning to labour' (Stewart, 1999).

A sense of what has changed in 'doing the knowledge' can be the gained from comparing the following comments, from interviews we have recently conducted in East London:

> We call it the knowledge because it's not something you can learn from a book; you have to pick it up by keeping your eyes and ears open as you move around. You're not only learning the street names or which connects to which. You're learning about the traffic conditions at different times of the day, what short cuts to take, how things change according to the season or what's happening in the world; you're learning about what areas are like, where you're likely to meet trouble, or get a lot of You listen and learn from the other cabbies. The knowledge – it's the tricks of the trade - it goes with the territory and there's a lot more to it than reading a map. Your GPS system may tell you the best way to go from A to B in the quickest possible time, but it doesn't know that next Tuesday, the short cuts you normally use in a particular area will be blocked because the local mums are organising a protest at an accident hot spot in the High Street where three kiddies have been run over - *45 year old Taxi Driver Canning Town.*

> Knowledge is today's most important commodity. Whether we are talking about the research and development of products, or skill networking within the enterprise, whether it is a question of professional development and training, or improving information retrieval systems whether we are concerned with evidence based policy or making sure that our staff are up with the latest state of the art gismos, then knowledge management is the name of the game. It does not matter if you are an international corporation or a small business, a university, a hospital, an IT company or a bank, if you want to gain or retain competitive advantage, then you have to stay ahead of the knowledge management game - *International Knowledge Management Management Consultant Canary Wharf.*

The aim of contemporary knowledge management is auto-poesis – the development of self replicating, self correcting and self sustaining systems of technological innovation (Strathern, 2004). Equally the aim of much post industrial vocational training is the formation of knowledge workers who can operate and manage these systems (DfEE, 1998). The central contradiction of auto-poetic capitalism is that competitive advantage is conferred by maximizing the conditions of product innovation; these depend on collaborative intellectual activity and extending the knowledge supply chain so that information is increasingly socialised and shared; but this in turn tends to undermine intellectual property rights and the individual

appropriation and use of innovatory knowledge, which alone give it market value and yield competitive advantage (Logan, 2004) .

Over the last two decades the knowledge practices associated with auto-poetic capitalism have become hyper-valorised and now serve as a benchmark for all other kinds of labour. As a result, many of the jobs, especially in the service industries, hitherto regarded as manual occupations, find themselves subsumed under a quite different rubric. Hairdressers, for example now discover to their amazement that according to some occupational classifications they are working in the creative industries alongside web designers, architects and estate agents. As in this comment from another of our informants:

> When I told the careers I wanted to be a hairdresser,she said oh that's good, sheila you know that's a very creative job, it'swhat they call creative industry these days. Actually I learnt the job from my mum and as far as she is concerned it's more to do with elbow grease than painting by numbers - *17 year old Hairdressing Apprentice in Barking.*

It remains to be seen whether the introduction of new info-design and eco-technologies into the construction trades will recruit plumbers and bricklayers into the 'creative class', or whether they will remain living labour's other scene. But at the very least we need to investigate empirically, case by case to see how far the division between manual and mental labour has been suppressed or superseded, or has been reinvented in a new and insidious form. It is certainly the case that much of the concrete knowledge which continues to inform the learning and practice of manual trades, has been radically devalorized as the basis of knowledge claims about how social production and society as a whole is organised, even through in specific labour market conditions manual trades continue to be in high demand (Pearce and Hillman, 1998).

The following story, told by a skilled tradesmen who was made redundant and then sent on a retraining course, gives us a good sense of what is stake here:

> What they wanted us to do was basically write directions for somebody to direct them how to arrive at a destination. They'd give you a map and you would have to explain. They had churches and schools and things like that on the map. And you'd have to say, you turnleft at the school, turn right past the co-op and then you turn left into a cul-de-sac, there is this building site. What they were more concerned about was grammar, English, full stops and spelling. Now I've worked on construction sites all my life and have never known a worker to want to write anything down. Or to be worried about his grammar, his English and his full stops. And while they were going on about grammar and punctuation, the trainers didn't know anything about building terminology. They didn't know what pile sheeting is. They asked me, and I'd show them, and they'd have a go at me about my lack of punctuation. It was a joke - *50 year old shipyard engineering worker describing his experience of a redundancy training scheme in Thurrock.*

This manoeuvre pivots on a redefinition of the meaning and functions of skill. First, skills are dissociated from specific practices of labour and forms of co-ordination

exercised by workers over the immediate labour process. Secondly, skills are divorced from their historical association with particular trades or occupational cultures and their acquisition is no longer entailed or embedded in a determinate community of practice. Instead work practices are re-classified into occupational training families, the family resemblances between a whole lot of disparate practices being defined in terms of functional properties of co-ordination between atomized operations of the mind/body/machine interfacing within the same information environment – this distributed network now constituting the essential unit of production. In this discourse, skills have become abstract universals – and this is what makes them transferable between one industry or work context and another. Training in transferable skills is training emptied of determinate content and considered in its generic commodity form as an interchangeable unit/factor of production (More, 1980).

A new language of abstraction is thus employed to describe labour processes and how they are learnt as if they were conformed to impersonal bureaucratic processes (Cohen, 1997). In so far as this hyper-rationalized model is applied to the learning of concrete labour processes, the result is positively surreal. Here, for example is an extract from a training manual produced by the Scottish Education Council which modestly describes itself as a providing the learning framework for a 'module to enable the student to enhance her/his haircutting skills in the specialist area of beards and moustaches:

Learning Outcomes   The student should:
1. communicate effectively the client to determine requirements
2. analyse the hair, devise a cutting strategy, and select appropriate tools and equipment
3. perform the cut safely and effectively
Content/context

Corresponding to Learning Outcomes 1-3

1. Good questioning technique: interpretation of client's wishes; communication of possible difficulties with tact and reaching agreement over any necessary compromise
2. Consideration of client's personal characteristics and beard/moustache idiosyncrasies; selection of method taking into account possible hair growth limitations

3. Methodical pattern of work; avoidance or correction of scissor marks; check cutting; the achievement of a balanced result to the client's satisfaction.

The abstraction of the labour form is linked to the individualization of the pedagogy through which it is acquired (Bernstein, 1996). The external controls of Fordist work discipline and line management are replaced by the internalization of techniques of reflexive self-regulation – the 'inner foreman' rules OK, and what has to be learnt are essentially behavioural etiquettes which enable the worker to monitor and gain control over the self - to master techniques of tension and impression management which gear

a model of self-actualization into norms of workplace productivity. Playing it cool is the new post-Fordist work ethic (Frank, 1998).

Under these conditions the extent to which people experience a sense of social worth and public purpose related to their work is not simply reducible to the stock of social or cultural capital that they enjoy as a result of it (Sennett, 2003). There are more subtle, sedimented and unconscious patterns of dis/identification and complex family biographical dynamics which come into play, as individuals and groups struggle to assert some claim to learn and know about the world through their work , or else turn away from it in favour of pursuing, through various kinds of performativity, a more socially abstracted selfhood.

Here are two statements which capture very well what is at stake and how the dialectics of old and new labour work out on the ground within the framework of an ongoing debate between the generations:

> My old man's a car mechanic. I'm what they call a boy racer. We both fix cars, if you know what I mean. I've learnt a lot from my dad what makes engines tick , he don't exactly approve of some of the things I get up to, but like he says, how else am I gonna learn on the job and get my kicks at the same time - *17 year old boy racer in Southend.*

> My dad used to say, it's not what you know, it's who you know. He used to work on the shipbuilding then he was laid off and he never got another job. He just got embittered, he didn't understand what was happening. But with me it was different. I went to college, learnt to walk the walk and talk the talk. These days to do the business you have to know where people are coming from, and how to use them to get where you want to be. I have a lot of mates who were clever, who knew more than me , but they didn't know how to use their stuff like I did - *22 year old Sound Engineer living in Dagenham.*

Narrative Grammars
It is widely recognized, though not so much researched, that locally situated knowledge claims are often entailed in the form of stories and folklores relayed across generations, connecting themes of learning and labour to more general paradigms of the life course. These story lines are often embedded in family narratives, transmitted through formal and informal pedagogies, and/or reproduced in peer group and workplace culture (Thompson and Bertaux, 1993).

Our previous research has offered a fourfold model of these knowledge grids or templates, linking the acquisition of different kinds of narrative identity to dispositions and skills associated with particular paradigms of learning and labour: the codes of inheritance, apprenticeship, vocation and career (Cohen, 1999). Until recently, each code provided a distinctive 'biographical imaginary' within which it was possible for people, to make sense of the unfolding of a life history. Thus, commonsense notions of the 'good life' may be variously articulated through the endowment or transmission of fixed assets (inheritance); the quest for inner fulfillment (vocation); through generationally-transmitted techniques of bodily mastery and social competence, (apprenticeship); or via increments of professional

status or qualification (career). Each paradigm thus has its own definition and practice of knowledge transmission: as a set of customary practices tied to a corpus of instructional texts or character traits (inheritance); as spiritual guidance or discipline prompted by the inner voice of conscience or the pursuit of special ' gifts' (vocation) ; as acquisition of the tricks of the trade in moving from peripheral to participation in a community of practice (apprenticeship); as the accreditation of professional expertise regulated by public examination (career). The gendering of these codes, for example the association of vocation with femininised pursuits, and inheritance with patriarchal ones, the construction of 'career women' and the apprenticing of boys as mates to men, is also a major principle of their articulation.

Historically these codes had their own preferred sites and settings of knowledge transmission and mutation: in family, small business or corporate enterprise, in artistic schools or bohemian communities, or yet again in agencies of formal education and professional training, or the labour movement. In communist societies it was the party apparatus and the corporate state which institutionalized the process of 'growing up proletarian' as an apprenticeship to a particular kind of ideological inheritance, in which individual aspirations were to be submerged under the 'historical vocation' of the class for world revolution, but which in practice fed into a career structure maintained by an enormous bureaucracy. In the West the codes, separately or in a variety of strong or weak combinations, developed into distinctive configuration of social, cultural and intellectual capital, whose fortunes remain bound up for a long period with those of specific class formations (More, 1980).

Today there is considerable, if scattered, evidence that in post industrial societies, these codes have weakened and in some cases floated free from any fixed institutional anchorage, to the point where none constitutes a single overarching grid of representation amounting to a master narrative (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim,1996). In many, but not all contexts, career structures have become de-stabilised (although the metaphorics of career continues to exercise a powerful effect on many narratives of aspiration); the expressive idioms of vocation have been increasingly instrumentalised and now increasingly subsume those of apprenticeship, whose formal existence as both legal indenture or customary practice has anyway declined. Indeed it is through this 'vocationalisation' that apprenticeship continues to exert a strong pull as a paradigm of learning within communities of practices outside the material labour process. The grid of inheritance continues to transmit cultural as well as material assets from generation to generation within social elites, but has lost its purchase on the public imagination as a more general narrative of aspiration, except in cases where these are re-linked to discourses of religion, race or ethnic nationalism.

As a result of this loosening up, gaps have emerged in the linear sense of historical life progression, and also in the institutional frameworks of education and training that are supposed to support it (Sennett, 1998). For example, at a time when the job for life has for many, been replaced by the short term contract, the constructs of apprenticeship or career may no longer correspond to any real opportunity structure; yet as a biographical imaginary they may retain salience. Moving in the opposite direction, the profane ambitions of the careerist may be segued into a more spiritual quest, via the life style vocationalism promoted by the gurus of new age capitalism, or become telescoped into an endless search for 'new beginnings' or 'fresh starts' (Frank, 1998). Meanwhile on the other side of the social tracks, race or religion may

fill the void that has been opened up between a fixed sense of origins and the fulfillment of destiny by the collapse of inheritance as normative code especially for communities of labour adrift of the official knowledge economy. Today as these paradigms weaken fragments of all these grids may also be selectively combined to create new hybrid narratives of shared aspiration as the basis of generalized rhetorical appeals to unify an increasingly differentiated civil society, as we find in certain 'third way' rhetorics (Giddens, 1998).

However, these transformations also put in question the theoretical model itself, in so far as it remains premised on a relatively stable, predictable grid of periodization and a predicament being thrown over the whole life course, supporting coherent forms of self narration and, in some inflections, the notion of a resilient ego perpetually accommodating to change (alias the neo-liberal subject). This raises a number of further issues relating to how far the model is applicable to non-Western societies; The extent to which elements of it were appropriated and reworked in the context of colonialism; whether the process of decolonization may have actually inscribed the career code as a project of modernization associated with the establishment of post colonial elites; the role of ethnic and civic nationalism in creating narratives of aspiration based on these or alternative paradigms of learning and livelihood; in what ways these codes become traveling stories, integrated into diasporic networks of situated knowledge as a result of international migration linked to globalization itself.

Finally, the term 'code' itself, useful though it is in referring to forms of routinization and regulation through which grids become embedded in established communities of customary practice, it nevertheless begs the question of how these forms come into being – how the disparate elements are assembled and stabilised – and equally the relays through which they are connected to other ensembles and the processes through which they are transformed , weakened or even disappear without trace (Latour, 2004).

Furthermore, research is needed to dissolve the code model into a navigation device for following the multiple stories, of people, places and practices in transit, narratives whose threads may get recognisably snagged around some of these starting points, but which once disentangled might lead elsewhere, redoing the knowledge as they go.

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