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Finding a reflexive voice: ... researching the
problems of implementing new learning practices
within a New Zealand manufacturing organisation.

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requirements for the degree of
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Preface / Acknowledgements

Setting out to write a thesis is a daunting task; a journey of learning and self-discovery. I wish that now I have completed this journey, I could start again with the knowledge and insights I have gained. In the beginning I was not confident about how to proceed but relied on the journey itself to take me towards some useful ending points. I found that there were many pathways through the organisation I studied, some historical, some of the moment, some hinting at the future. Each pathway was perplexing and tantalising in the realities presented, and each populated with interesting and committed people trying to make sense of the organisational world they had a hand in creating. For people looking for one reality or prescriptions on how to achieve reflexive learning, this thesis is probably not going to satisfy this need. What I hope it does do is give some descriptive insight into the forces that shape organisational participants reflexive experience and perhaps stimulate ideas for ways in which reflexivity can be more readily engaged towards constructive challenge and change.

In the process of investigating and writing this thesis, the knowledge that has shaped and formed my own thinking and practice during the past 15 years as an organisational development (OD) consultant has been challenged. Investigating the productive effects of new sets of knowledge and practices on people and organisations has led me to look more closely at the ethics of OD interventions and attempt to identify ways to make my own practice more cognisant of these affects.

Over the past 2 years, a number of inspiring people have helped me to navigate my way through the concepts, possibilities and frustrations of the research; most importantly my supervisor Dr Craig Prichard. Thank you Craig for your wise guidance, your ability to ask questions that took my thinking in completely new directions, the way in which you helped me translate my insight into words, your support and encouragement, and for encouraging me to just write! Thanks also to Dr Phil Ramsay for reviewing this thesis in its 'semi-final' form and challenging me to engage my own reflexivity to gain greater insight into what I have learned from this research and how this applies to my own practice. And to the staff at the Massey library, especially Celia and Joanne, thank you for your support and helpful guidance, often in times of great stress!

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Table of Contents

Preface / Acknowledgements.....	ii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Tables	vii
List of Figures	viii
Abstract	ix
CHAPTER 1: Introduction.....	1
The battlefield	1
Why focus on reflexivity?.....	2
Researching reflexivity	3
Critical reading of this research	5
CHAPTER 2: The Learning Organisation and Organisational Learning	6
Introduction.....	6
Finding the reflexive voice within the literature	8
<i>Defining the reflexive voice</i>	8
The Learning Organisation	11
<i>Nature of the Learning Organisation</i>	11
<i>The promise of the Learning Organisation</i>	12
Socio-cultural approaches	16
<i>Legitimacy and Peripherality</i>	16
<i>The relationship of learning and working</i>	17
<i>The reflexive voice within situated learning perspectives</i>	18
<i>The need to unlearn</i>	19
<i>Summary</i>	21
CHAPTER 3: From promise to problematization.....	23
Introduction.....	23
The productive relationship of power and knowledge.....	24
<i>Power –wielded by individual agency or defined by underlying forces?</i>	25
<i>Power - invisible and enacted at the micro-level through discourse</i>	25
<i>Power - a definition of power for this critical research</i>	27
Problematizing functional approaches to learning.....	28
<i>Learning Organisations – controlling freedom and social virtue?</i>	28
<i>Power and control within collective learning practice</i>	31
<i>Critique of Unlearning</i>	34
<i>Summary</i>	35
CHAPTER 4: Methodology	36
Overview	36
Critical action research.....	37
<i>Participation</i>	37
<i>Insight</i>	38
<i>Critique</i>	38
<i>Transformative Re-definition</i>	40
Research methods.....	40

<i>Interviews</i>	40
<i>Observation</i>	41
<i>Reflexive Forums</i>	41
Creating ‘good research’	42
<i>My role as researcher</i>	42
<i>Representing the data</i>	43
<i>Risks and ethical challenges</i>	44
<i>Managing ethical risks and challenges</i>	45
CHAPTER 5: Historical perspectives	47
Introduction	47
A company history characterised by diversity and change	48
Tradition, people, practice	49
<i>People Practices</i>	51
<i>Manufacturing practice</i>	52
<i>Management Practice</i>	53
The ‘good old days’ and the ‘dark ages’	55
Analytical Framework	58
DISCUSSION: Discursive affects on reflexivity	60
CHAPTER 6: The nature and emergence of PIP	65
Introduction	65
Resurrection and reinvention of the PIP	65
Interplay of the traditionalist discourses within the PIP	68
Tradition, survival and risk behaviours	71
PIP and Production ... aka ‘if it ain’t production it ain’t anything’	73
Analytical Framework	74
Multiple realities of PIP	75
<i>Midtex - once the ‘jewel in the crown’</i>	76
<i>Lowtex... the poor cousin</i>	81
<i>Hightex Factory ... the flagship</i>	86
DISCUSSION: Finding the reflexive voice within the PIP	88
<i>Insularism and the PIP</i>	88
<i>Inertia and tradition</i>	89
<i>Multiple Realities of PIP</i>	90
<i>Resistance and reflexivity</i>	91
<i>Peripheries and legitimacy</i>	92
<i>Summary</i>	93
CHAPTER 7: Reflexive voices and the research intervention	95
Introduction	95
North Island production meeting	95
<i>How productionist concerns mediate reflexivity</i>	95
<i>The effects of new managers</i>	98
PIP Review Meetings	99
The CEO Briefing	100
Interviews	101
Reflexive Forums	103
DISCUSSION: Finding the reflexive voice within the research	107
<i>New managers and the production of a new management discourse</i>	107

<i>Meeting practice and reflexivity</i>	108
<i>My own voice within the research</i>	109
<i>Implications</i>	110
CHAPTER 8: Conclusion	111
The PIP Gateway	112
Experiencing Action Research.....	113
Recommendations for Practitioners	115
Bibliography.....	116
APPENDIX 1: Informed consent and confidentiality.....	122
Research overview to the research organisation	122
Letter of endorsement to research participants from the research organisation.....	125
Information sheet for participants	126
Consent form for participants	128
Permission Letter to conduct research	129
Authority for the release of tape transcripts	130
APPENDIX 2: Methodology	131
Interview protocol and guidelines.....	131
Interview Sheet	135
APPENDIX 3: Research Data.....	137
Reflexive Forum: Presentation slides	137
Template Project on a page (POP).....	139
EXAMPLE: Edited notes of the North Island Production Meeting.....	140
APPENDIX 4: Administration.....	143
Research timeline	143
Scholarship approval letter.....	144

List of Tables

Table 1: Defining the reflexive voice.....	11
Table 2: The reflexive voice within the Learning Organisation	14
Table 3: The reflexive voice within the OL literature.....	21
Table 4: New Zealand Manufacturing Group Organisational Fabric	51
Table 5: Comparative Learning contexts	57
Table 6: Productive affects of traditionalist, survivalist and insularism discourses upon the reflexive voice.....	59
Table 7: Comparison of PIP decision criteria and Learning Organisation behaviours...	72
Table 8: Productive affects of the productionist discourse upon the reflexive voice	75
Table 9: Reflexive Forum Summary.....	104

List of Figures

Figure 1: Respondents number of years employed at Tileco	103
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Abstract

This study explored the social forces mediating manager's participation in a new reflexive participative learning practice designed to improve profitability within a New Zealand manufacturing organisation. Despite a large theoretical and managerial body of literature on organisational learning there has been little empirical investigation of how people experience and engage their reflexivity towards challenging the status-quo to create high level learning and new knowledge. Power was identified as a potential moderator of the reflexive learning experience and the variable relations of power and learning were constructed from a review of literature and these relationships were explored and investigated within the case study. Two prevailing discourses were identified as powerful moderators of public reflexivity, the traditionalist discourse which constructed managers actions and conversations towards insularism and survivalist concerns and the productionist discourse in which institutionalised production practices encircled and mediated managers actions and what constituted legitimacy in conversations. This study used a critical action research method to place the reflexive experience of managers and the researcher at the center of the study and provide data representative of the social discourses that constructed variable freedoms and constraints upon the reflexive voice.