Skills and selves in the new workplace

ABSTRACT
In the neoliberal imaginary of contemporary capitalism, workers’ employment value depends on their skills. Skills terms, especially communication, team, and leadership, formulate aspects of personhood and modes of sociality as productive labor. The key semiotic properties of skills terms are strategic indexicality (expressing alignment with corporate values) and denotational indeterminacy (knowledge and practices referred to as skills are quite disparate). Yet all skills are assumed to be commensurable and readily available for inculcation into workers. Drawing from Internet sites marketing skills-related services, I explore the semiotic properties of discourses that facilitate skills’ commensurability and commodification.

Not long ago, a graduating senior told me of her conversation with her brother about job-hunting strategies, including thinking of oneself as a “bundle of skills.” This self-perception seemed natural, she said. A study of student life in 12 elite U.S. colleges and universities reports that students described themselves “as products, not people” (Seaman 2005:99); the study’s author, in a lecture about the study, said he was struck by students’ descriptions of themselves as “bundles of skills.” The following self-assessment website provides a rationale and template for this form of self-imagining, that is, for viewing skills as aspects of personhood with exchange value on the labor market:

A skill is learned ability to do something well. Skills are the currency used by workers. In the labour market you receive pay in exchange for the skills that you offer and use at work. Individuals who can describe themselves to a potential employer in terms of their skills are more likely to find the work that they want and enjoy. ... Each person has approximately 700 different skills in their repertoire. [University of Waterloo Career Services n.d.]

For one to “have” 700 skills, one must imagine much of what one knows, does, says, and is as aspects of productive labor. How do workers imagine themselves as internalized exchange systems in which segments of self are like money? How are segments of self linguistically constructed as commodifiable skills that experts can inculcate into workers? What does that process say about the world of contemporary work—the “new workplace”?

The new worker–self in the new workplace

The notion of “worker-self-as-skills-bundle” (not only is the worker’s labor power a commodity but the worker’s very person is also defined by the summation of commodifiable bits) is a social construction cumulatively produced by years of skills discourses in business and education. These skills discourses operate in and index (indicate the existence of) the

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history and conditions of capitalist production, particularly since the 1970s, variously called “post-Fordism,” “late capitalism,” “flexible accumulation,” and, most relevant to this study, “neoliberalism,” in which all possible forms of sociality and being are treated as market exchanges (Harvey 2005). By skills discourses, I mean discourses that sell skills or skills-related products or that offer workers advice or exhortation about acquiring, assessing, and enhancing their own skills. Such discourses are readily found in public media; most of what I use in this article is drawn from the Internet. Dominated by references to communication, team, and leadership skills, such discourses are a vivid manifestation of the neoliberal imaginary, characterized by a manageriast demand for the products of intellectual labour—knowledge coded as intellectual property, which makes possible the commodity object—to be accountable to the logic of exchange-value and market mechanisms. The neoliberal imaginary seeks to subject all socio-cultural practices to the laws of the market, which are one manifestation, albeit limited, of the logic of capital. [Rossiter 2003:109]

Ned Rossiter’s statement effectively summarizes the assumptions shaping skills discourses. Skills referents are commensurable insofar as they have value on a labor market. Otherwise, skills referents cover a range of disparate practices, knowledge, and ways of acting and being. In short, they are denotationally indeterminate. Yet this indeterminacy renders them strategically deployable in referring acts in which the critical aspects are who deploys the referent, for what audience, in what contexts, and to what ends. Many, perhaps most, such references are to soft skills, aspects of self and social interaction (chief among these, communication, teamwork, and leadership) conceptualized as aspects of tasks, transferable techniques, and productive contributions.

The emergence of contemporary skills discourses illustrates both semiotic process and the social dynamics and shifts informing such process. In a trivial sense, skills could be examined in terms of denotational shift: The noun skill once denoted a specific manual or machine operation and now denotes any practice, form of knowledge, or way of being constituting productive labor. But this denotational shift is part of a more interesting pragmatic picture in which the pertinent questions concern what acts of reference to skills reveal about the social conditions and alignments generating those acts. Referring is a social act, its interactive success depending on relations among participants in a discourse. The participants in this discourse are those governing the arrangement of labor, their alignments supported by the conditions of contemporary capitalism. Those alignments continually emerge in the indexical (socially embedded) aspects of skills reference. At the same time, as Asif Agha (2007:124) notes, denotation itself has a social dimension, in that denotational norms may be socially specific. For example, the denotational norms for all skills, including soft skills, include quantification: Skills are assumed to be segmentable, testable, and rankable. Listening and presenting are as assessable as speaking French or running Photoshop, however disparate they all might otherwise seem.

The interrelatedness of skills, worker-selves, and labor arrangements goes back at least as far as the emergence of scientific management during the late 19th-century expansion of U.S. corporations. When workplaces were conceptualized as top-down models of efficiency and workers imagined in terms of how their task management was best engineered by expert managers, skills were conceptualized as parts of tasks over which workers had decreasing control (Braverman 1974). When economic shifts of recent decades led to the reconceptualization of workplaces as flat and flexible, and of workers as team members (Martin 1994), skills were reimagined as technologies of self (Foucault 1988), as ways of being and acting that moved tasks forward. As aspects of worker performance, skills have become conceptualized as “things” that can be acquired and measured and that possess an inherent capacity to bring about desired outcomes, outcomes that can be measured in dollars.²

Skills have become highly fetishized: A hot skills market operates on the Internet, with businesses selling skills inculcation and assessment products to employers and employees. Websites promote worker responsibility for getting skills, provide the means to evaluate workers through skills assessment, and are rhetorically central in convincing workers to manage their selves to fit shifting conditions of capitalism. As the neoliberal dream has increasingly saturated the new workplace, workers have come to be seen as personally responsible for skills acquisition, to the point of self-commodification. Thus, the value placed on the paradigmatic soft skills of communication, teamwork, and leadership. At the same time, it is important to note what does not shift. Certain cultural beliefs have remained potently defining throughout U.S. history: beliefs in the transformative power of technology, the absolute value of efficiency, and the indomitability of the self-controlled individual. These long-enduring cultural beliefs also help shape and inform contemporary notions of “skills.”

Given that denotation has this social aspect, and given the critical role of the social conditions of reference, the defining elements of skills discourses, not surprisingly, do not make up a coherent semantic field but a loose associational chain,³ a cluster of mutually enregistered usages (Silverstein 2003) that are referentially successful to the extent that users share, or buy into, specific presuppositions about workers and labor: who workers should be, how they
In this article, I examine the use of the terms skills, communication, team, and leadership in corporate-oriented Internet discourses. I show how such terms become mutually enregistered and how their denotational vagueness is central to their strategic use, linked as they are to their users’ alignment with corporate values. This semiotic work is central to the ways in which skills emerge as commodities and skills inculcation emerges as a profitable business. Skills take on reality through the ways in which they are fetishized. Communication skills, in particular, are fetishized as surefire techniques that can transform users and bring in the bucks (or pounds or euros). The credentialed experts who inculcate skills into workers, managers, and executives get often-hefty fees for skills workshops lasting a few days or, sometimes, hours. Skills themselves exist somewhat diffusely as entextualized techniques credited with the capacity to bring about measurable outcomes; their reality lies both in their promise of success and their status as commodities. That promise and commodification are made concrete and persuasive through socially embedded discourses in which workers become not just producers but embodiments of their companies, entrepreneurial agents responsible for company success. This construction of self has become naturalized for the promoters of these discourses and for their customers. It seems unavoidable to their customers’ employees. And judging from my opening anecdote, many young people about to enter the labor market have already internalized the message.

How skills discourses work

Reference to skills is now endemic in government and corporate talk about education, particularly by those concerned with the deleterious effects of an inadequately trained workforce on the U.S. economy. In the early 1980s, state legislatures began calling for higher education accountability, a call repeated at the federal level in 2003 by Representative John Boehner (R-OH), as chairman of the Committee on Education and the Workforce during the hearings for the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. Representative Boehner states, “I have learned in some States, public colleges and universities require their students to take basic skills assessments before, during, and after their degree program. Assessment results provide the higher education system, the State and policymakers, students and families, with tangible results about the quality of the education provided” (U.S. House, Committee on Education and the Workforce 2003).

Representative Boehner’s call for skills assessment typifies a climate in which educational policy is increasingly driven by measurable economic outcomes, as the full text of his speech makes clear. In her analysis of educational policy research, Kathleen Hall (2005) examines the rhetoric of “scientifically based research standards” for assessing educational programs and the privileging of a concept of “knowledge” that most readily lends itself to objective measurement. What counts as good education is that which produces measurably useful forms of knowledge and practice, that is, good educational products. “Scientific evidence, assumed to prove what works, is increasingly commodified and presented to the public on websites and in various publications, packaged as transparently reliable and politically neutral objective knowledge” (Hall 2005:180).

The conceptualization of such products as skills can be seen on the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2004b) website, headlined “Young People Urgently Need New Skills to Succeed in the Global Economy.” The mission of this organization is “to bring 21st Century Skills to every child in America by serving as a catalyst for change in teaching, learning, and assessment and as an advocate among education policy makers through a unique partnership among education, business, and government leaders” (Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2004a). Businesses listed in the partnership include Adobe Systems, Dell, Intel, Microsoft, and Verizon. Among the skills it promotes are “core school subjects” identified by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: “21st century content” (e.g., “Global awareness”), “learning and thinking skills,” “information and communications technology,” “life skills,” and “21st century assessments.” Above all, it promises a “vision for 21st century education to ensure every child’s success as citizens and workers in the 21st century,” providing students with practices and forms of knowledge that will fit them into the parts of the economy expanding with technological growth, and that will bring them economic returns—in other words, “what works.” “What works” ties together the denotationally various skills in this list.

As can be seen in the language of this and other websites, skills and its mutually enregistered terms are associated with ideas about education, work, technology, and
change (e.g., drive change, catalyst for change), exemplifying Raymond Williams’s “keywords”: “significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; [and] . . . significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought” (1983:15). Keywords, Williams argues, are complex and variable in signification and occur in clusters. Their meanings expand as part of the new formation of which they themselves partake. This clustering, this variability in signification, and, above all, this tendency to expand with ideas of how the world is or should be are common features of corporate key terms. Deborah Cameron (2000) points out two contradictory referents of communication skills: the scripted, specific, routinized labor of call-center employees and the unscripted general capacity (usually of managers) to get along with people of different cultural backgrounds or to cooperate with others in getting a task done. James Paul Gee and colleagues describe how terms such as motivated partner or committed worker in “fast capitalist texts” (1996:29) come into common and seemingly positive use but not with the meanings most users associate with the terms. Cris Shore and Susan Wright (2000), in their analyses of audit culture, the movement of efficiency-inspired systems of personal assessment and accountability into noncorporate (esp. government and academic) venues, note corresponding new uses of the terms accountability, audit, and stakeholder. These uses show how a “migrating keyword becomes the centre of a new semantic cluster,” which Marilyn Strathern calls “domaining effect,” “whereby the conceptual logic of an idea associated with one domain is transposed onto another” (Shore and Wright 2000:60).

This discussion of keywords points up some important properties of terms in skills discourses: Skills-related terms are semantically variable, they tend to cluster, and they tend to expand with new conceptual formations. These properties arise from their enregisterment and use as strategically deployable shifters, or SDSs (Urciuoli 2003, 2005a, 2005b). A shifter is a linguistic element (word or grammatical category) that has no context-independent lexical meaning (“dictionary definition”) because its “referential value . . . depends on the presupposition of its pragmatic value” (Silverstein 1976:24). Shifters can only be fully interpreted in terms of the speaker’s position in a specific place, time, social context, or some combination thereof, as when English speakers say “this” or “that,” “here” or “there,” “then” or “now.” Thus, they are interpreted in ways that align the speaker with other elements of context. Those elements of context can include social relations, as when people use “here—there” or “this—that” or “us—them” to set up social (rather than simply time or space) alignments: for example, “We don’t do that here.” I propose that this same function of social alignment emerges in strategic uses of terms that are otherwise seen as ordinary words with dictionary definitions. Such SDSs are referring expressions whose semantic value seems obvious yet is hard to pin down, and this semantc indeterminacy is a critical aspect of their use, given that their primary function is social alignment.

Here let me distinguish SDS usage from other indexically embedded aspects of reference. First, denotation itself, as noted above, does have a social basis, so that the same form can be used in different registers with variant denotata. Second, as also noted earlier, the act of reference is itself socially embedded, so that the hearer’s interpretation of a referring expression depends on what the hearer knows about that situation (e.g., I may take a technical term from a specialist more literally than from a nonspecialist). Third, the denotata of some referring expressions are indeterminate or ambiguous, but their meanings are filled in by participants; people use evaluative terms like love in this way. Then, there is the particular use that I call “SDS”: the strategic deployment of semantically vague or ambiguous terms in referring acts, the primary function of which is the display of social alignments. This is common in politics, in which, for example, growth and security turn up in referring expressions as indexes of candidate positions on the dangers of taxation or invasion. In this way, skills-related references can function as SDSs in corporate discourses to index alignment. As a CEO, I might refer to excellence and leadership skills in an expression of business philosophy aligning my interests with those of leadership gurus like Stephen Covey, without specifying whose skills or excellence of what. By contrast, as a homeowner, if I were to refer to the excellence of carpentry skills, I would probably be talking about a specific contractor’s terrific work on a renovation project, and I would probably just say, “He or she did a great job.”

Skills-related terms like leadership, excellence, team, communication, and so on become, as Silverstein (2003) puts it in his discussion of indexical ordering, mutually enregistered. That is, they form clusters of usage (registers), each of which presupposes a previously existing set of usages and interpretations, such that, when they are used together, particular elements of meaning collectively emerge. As each new usage moves into an existing register, that usage takes on indexical values most compatible with pre-existing usages. There is no zero-level starting point for register formation; relations between specific acts of discourse and their framing social order are always ongoing and unfixed, so the potential for new discursive formation, that is, for new register formation, always exists (Silverstein 2003:212–213). The outcomes of each of these microlevel acts of discourse, including referential, are never fixed or fully predictable because they never happen outside of time. And, cumulatively, these outcomes can affect the social order that frames them, that is, can be performative.

One performative outcome is the way meanings form, because the interpretation of a referring expression at any given time represents an accumulation of specific
interpretations. In this way, meanings conventionally regarded as dictionary definitions represent accumulations of interpretations (not all of which were referential) that emerged in particular times and places. In the case of skills SDSs, this indexical accumulation has resulted in a certain vacuousness of terms related in loose associational chains; this is true of political SDSs, as well. By contrast, when technical registers form, referring expressions accumulate relatively specific denotata that fit into relatively organized taxonomies of meaning. (Other performative outcomes of the enregisterment process include the routinization of users’ alignment with a particular referent and the values it represents. This is linked to users’ conceptualization of that referent; in the case of skills SDSs, referents become naturalized as “things” available for commodification.) By way of illustrating differences in register formation, consider the different enregisterments of the term communication. In linguistic pragmatics, communication is enregistered with index, function, and social, terms deriving from a tradition of empirical analysis of open-ended, complex social processes, with specific denotata linked in semantically specific ways and generally used in social analysis.8 In corporate registers, communication is enregistered with skills, team, and leadership, terms deriving from a model of business as an idealized, predictable set of processes (see also Cameron 2000:180), denoting elements of that process, and generally used either in the explication of that process or in the formation of work policies that direct and constrain labor in ways coherent with the value of efficiency (another SDS).

The enregisterment of skills in corporate discourses is consistently marked by specific grammatical features. The website selection quoted at the beginning of this article is typical: “a skill is”; “skills are”; “in exchange for the skills that you offer and use”; “in terms of their skills”; “has 700 skills in their repertoire.” In this passage, skill occurs most commonly as a count noun, most frequently in the plural. In subject position, on corporate websites, it is defined or some attribute of it is described. It is more frequently found in object position (of verb or preposition), typically as something one has (as on the Partnership for 21st Century Skills website). It occurs in discrete, countable units. In the plural form, it may occur in an adjective position, as in skills set or skills assessment (as Representative Boehner uses it). In these and certain uses of the plural form (set of skills, bundle of skills), the distinction between mass and count noun may be blurred. What rarely occurs in these discourses is the use of skill as a mass noun without the plural -s (e.g., carpentry takes a lot of skill) or skill in the -ed adjective form (a skilled artisan), although both usages are found in noncorporate discourses. These features may have grown more frequent in corporate skills-discourse enregisterment since the 1970s, congruent with the quantitative and typologizing rhetoric characteristic of skills inculcation and commodification, particularly soft skills.

**Neoliberalizing the self: Soft skills**

The distinction between soft and hard skills is made in the following passage, originally published in 2002 and since appearing in various forms on a variety of education websites (note the grammatical patterns described above):

A soft skill refers to the cluster of personality traits, social graces, facility with language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that mark each of us to varying degrees. Persons who rank high in this cluster, with good soft skills, are generally the people that most employers want to hire. Soft skills complement hard skills, which are the technical requirements of a job. The ideal, of course, is someone strong in both job and personal skills, but as one employer put it in a recent report, *Hard Work and Soft Skills*, “Don’t worry so much about the technical skills. We need you to teach them how to show up on time, how to work in teams, and how to take supervision.” [Menochelli 2006]

The interesting issue here is how soft skills, a post-Fordist development, came to trump hard skills. From the Industrial Revolution through the Fordist era, work-associated skills were hard, that is, manual or mechanical operations. Soft skills are what Michel Foucault (1988) calls “technologies of self,” ways to fashion subjectivity compatible with dominant practices, institutions, and beliefs.2 They establish the type of person valued by the privileged system in ways that seem natural and logical, they constrain what counts as valued knowledge, and they demonstrate willingness to play by the rules and belief in the system. They are hegemonic in Williams’s (1977) sense: naturalized, culture-saturating beliefs that maintain the distribution of social power. Soft skills represent a blurring of lines between self and work by making one rethink and transform one’s self to best fit one’s job, which is highly valued in an economy increasingly oriented toward information and service.

Of the first 60 websites I found in a Google search for the term skills, not quite half were .com sites, roughly a quarter were .edu, and roughly a quarter were .org. (a few were .net and .gov). These sites overwhelmingly feature soft skills. The .edu sites feature study skills (how to take notes, organize a paper, and manage time) and career-oriented skills. Information is presented in ways that stress the commensurateness of school-based and workplace-oriented training. For example, the University of Minnesota Duluth student handbook site instructs users to rethink liberal-arts education as quantifiable education products, as seen in this “transferable skills survey”:

As you begin your job search, it is important that you know your own qualifications. Over the years you have developed many skills from coursework, extracurricular activities and your total life experiences. If you’ve researched topics and written, edited and presented
papers for classes, you’ve used skills which are not limited to any one academic discipline or knowledge area but are transferable to many occupations. A prospective employer expects you to be able to apply the skills you have learned in college to the work environment. Below is a list of five broad skill areas which are divided into more specific skills. Rate the skills indicating your ability in each area. [University of Minnesota Duluth 2006]

The five broad skill areas are communication; research and planning; human relations; organization, management, and leadership; and work survival. Each contains 11 or 12 specific skills. Communication skills, for example, include speaking effectively, writing concisely, listening attentively, expressing ideas, facilitating group discussion, providing appropriate feedback, negotiating, perceiving nonverbal messages, persuading, reporting information, describing feelings, interviewing, and editing. One can numerically rate one’s degree of facility for each of these skills (0 = none, 1 = enough to get by, 2 = some, and 3 = strong).10

The .org sites (such as the Partnership for the 21st Century) feature skills-assessment information and career-enhancement information. Skills inventory sites often include academic subjects. The Occupational Information Network’s (n.d.) O*Net OnLine lists six “skills groups,” the first four of which comprise mostly soft skills (basic skills, complex problem-solving skills, resource-management skills, and social skills), the fifth (systems skills) indeterminately soft or hard, and the last (technical skills) hard. Basic skills (active listening, active learning, critical thinking, learning strategies, mathematics, monitoring, reading comprehension, science, speaking, and writing) mix academic subjects (math and science), discursive practices (speaking and writing), and cognitive processes (active listening, active learning, critical thinking, learning strategies, monitoring, and reading comprehension). The skills in this list are united by the assumption that they can be imagined as both disciplined aspects of a person and productive aspects of job performance.

The .com sites sell skills training and assessment, emphasizing communication, teamwork, and leadership. Technical (hard) skills, training in which takes time and experience, are far less apparent. Soft skills are typically sold through workshops or books. Communication skills are typically sold as techniques abstracted from segments of discursive practice (how to listen, organize parts of a speech, etc.). The discursive and interactive elements segmented out and packaged as communication, team, and leadership skills are chosen for their capacity to move a task along and to encourage self-identification with organizational goals, often including what might be called “enhanced subjectivity” in the form of increased self-confidence. Hence:

Improve Your Communication Skills. If the thought of speaking in front of an audience sends you into a cold sweat, then this Inc.com guide is for you. Communication experts and CEOs share their strategies for smooth communications with employees, making winning presentations to investors, writing and delivering speeches that get standing ovations, and much more. [Inc.com 2006]

This is especially true of leadership and team skills, linked as they are to workplace structure and ideology. Leader and team refer to positions in the flat (nonhierarchical) management model of the new workplace. Leaders inspire and empower (“True leaders do more than manage the business—they inspire your people” [Leapfrog Innovations 2007]), and team members complement each others’ capacities: “Imagine productive, high-functioning teams that achieve their objectives and then go further than you thought possible. Teams that make great decisions, resolve conflict, gain consensus, and communicate and collaborate fluidly—all on tight schedules. Sound like your teams? It can” (Leapfrog Innovations 2006).

Team training is about the ideal flexible worker (Martin 1994): self-monitoring, self-assessing, continuously self-improving (Shore and Wright 2000; Strathern 2000), and internalizing the organization’s interests (Martin 1997). Self-assessment is key, as the Brainbench company tells potential customers:

Your professional skills are the most important ingredient for career success. But how do you know what skills you have, and how do you know what skills you need to achieve your goals? As a Brainbench member you can set clear skills goals, measure your progress toward achieving those objectives, and see how your skills measure up against your peers—all through your convenient Brainbench Member Account. [1998–2007a]

Because they are part of the production process, skills must be measurable. Brainbench (1998–2000b) advertises assessment products for skills in 450 areas, including computer software (e.g., Excel, Photoshop, Windows), essential skills (e.g., English, listening skills, math), financial (e.g., accounting, financial analysis, investments), health care (e.g., anatomy, EMT, first aid), industry knowledge (e.g., automotive, child care, e-commerce), information technology (e.g., ASP, C/C++, Cisco), languages and communication (e.g., business writing, editing, English), management (e.g., human relations, managing people, marketing), and office skills (e.g., customer service, filing, typing). The eclectic nature of this skills inventory—mixing, for example, Photoshop, listening, child care, and the English language—echoes the Occupational Information Network skills list.

The cumulative strategic deployment of skills register on these soft-skills websites offers a template for rethinking
the self and reinforces the naturalness of such rethinking. The value of soft skills over hard skills lies in the value of a self-monitoring workforce, especially when the need for specific forms of knowledge or practice may be facilitated or displaced by other forms of production. Soft-skills discourses are largely about persuading workers that these skills are what they are made of: Soft skills become objectified as workers learn to regard themselves and their educations (incl. expensive liberal-arts education) in this way. These discourses draw heavily on the rhetoric of quantification, a strategy that fits the grammatical and semiotic structure of the message and reinforces its gravity. Skills that can be counted, rated, measured, and so forth, can also come up short, and whose fault is that but one’s own? The deployment of quantification rhetoric becomes part of the loose association of terms in this register, suggesting that all these disparate skills are commensurable. Their commensurability lies not in explicitly comparable qualities but implicitly in the notion that they can be assessed and inculcated in the same ways. This presupposition of workers as a set of measurable capacities is, in effect, an update of the Enlightenment notion of an abstract human that can be segmented into pieces, with each piece individually designed into what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls “the very shape and movement of the machine itself” (2000:662), or, if not machine, then some kind of cybernetic social process.

Where did this worker–self come from?

Although the venue of the ideal worker is the new workplace, some of its defining features are not that new. Charting the history of “skill” as a concept, and understanding the emergence of communication skills as, in effect, the defining soft skills of the contemporary workplace, means tracing some of the work contexts in which notions of the “worker” have emerged along with some history of the worker as a cultural construct.

In his study of U.S. kinship, David Schneider posits the person as a cultural unit central to the symbolic construction of kinship: “It is the construct of the person which articulates the various conceptual and symbolic domains of American culture and translates them into actionable forms,” serving as a “guide for action” (1980:60). Americans routinely typify social categories (e.g., nationality, class, gender, and race) in this manner. The American as a type of person overlaps heavily with the worker as a type of person, to the extent that the ideal American typifies defining qualities of the ideal worker. This figure surely serves as a guide to good cultural action: self-directed, self-controlling, self-improving, living a life that, starting no later than college, follows a steady trajectory of status accumulation and career advancement. If one does not start out as middle class, one should be aiming at that goal for oneself or, at least, for one’s children. Nor is the morality of self-management limited to the middle class. Ideally, workers should be ready and willing to subject themselves to disciplined self-improvement, a drive that stands in distinct opposition to what was seen, throughout the industrial era, as the natural incapacity of the working class for self-discipline.

The need to direct and discipline, particularly time discipline, the worker became the theme of the age of monopoly capital (Braverman 1974), the era of corporate expansion after the U.S. Civil War. With the post–WWII expansion of the U.S. middle class (particularly through the G.I. Bill), a vision of mobility from working-class roots to middle-class status and lifestyle came to be imagined as the natural order. Such mobility was in part possible through the opportunities and resources of the era of Fordist corporate expansion in the 1950s, but the story of mobility came to be read as the story of the individual rising through education and hard work. And, as discussed above, in the post–Fordist era of corporate contraction, outsourcing, and the new workplace, the ideal worker is imagined as the flexible worker, willing to adapt, self-train, and generally internalize the structures of work.

By the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the adjective skilled had become associated with labor: In a 1776 reference, Adam Smith defines mechanics, artificers, and manufacturers as skilled labor.1 For the skilled worker of that era, Harry Braverman points out, skills took a long time to learn, acquired through repeated practice in years of apprenticeship: “The concept of skill is traditionally bound up with craft mastery—that is to say, the combination of knowledge of materials and processes with the practiced manual dexterity required to carry on a specific branch of production” (1974:443). This craft mastery was broken up in the name of industrial efficiency under the regime of scientific management, a 19th-century manifestation of an older pattern of control over workers’ time. E. P. Thompson (1967) traces the gradual infiltration of a wage labor–based time sense into English consciousness, noting the growing distinction between workers’ time and employer’s time and the moral dimension of time fetishizing: Time wasting is characteristic of children, primitives, and undisciplined workers.

The disciplined, skilled worker–self is powerfully rooted in the influence of Calvinist Protestantism on a nascent emergent capitalist ethos, as Max Weber (1930) famously argued. John Adams (1989) sheds light on an especially relevant rhetorical moment in the development of the Puritan ethic, the vision of techne (skill or art) laid out by the 16th- to 17th-century Puritan scholar Alexander Richardson. Richardson envisioned a social order that was not based on arbitrary hierarchy but was an interlocking circle of knowledge and art, with human producers and consumers harmoniously joined in useful activity. In this scheme, teche manifests true scientific precepts exemplifying divine will. A developing technological sensibility became central to the 18th- and 19th-century U.S. national

Americans have characteristically regarded technology as a force outside the bounds of human society, privileging it as the cause of change and its practitioners as wielders of instruments of change (Downey 1998:10). In his analysis of technology as a U.S. keyword, Leo Marx (1997) notes that the set of concepts now recognized as technology emerged during late 19th-century corporate expansion, when technological development also moved from production into workforce management (Noble 1977). As a keyword, technology not only denoted but took part in, even led, the social phenomena that brought it forth. Although technology denotes machines or processes, it is better understood as indexing an emergent sociotechnological system of which machines are part: No clear boundary separates the artifact and the process. In the age of corporate expansion, references to technology came to index a naturalized order and status as they had not done previously. Denotationally, Marx notes, the word became “almost completely vacuous” (1997:983), acting as surrogate or mask “for the human actors actually responsible for the developments in question” (1997:984). In short, it became an SDS.12

Beliefs in the transformational power of technology operated in tandem with beliefs in the inherent value of order and efficiency.13 Efficiency crystallized as a powerful keyword (and no doubt as another SDS) in this corporate expansion era, when it must have permeated business discourse, thanks in no small part to Frederick Winslow Taylor’s development and proselytizing of scientific management in the 1890s. It also spread into other areas of U.S. society; Raymond Callahan (1962) traces its influence after 1900 on education-administrator training texts. Although Taylor certainly did proselytize successfully, efficiency was already a central value in U.S. society. In her reanalysis of Callahan, Barbara Berman (1983) shows that the business-efficiency model had influenced U.S. education since at least 1840. Taylor developed a product that business owners found irresistible: techniques for designing and controlling task structure as “one best way,” guaranteed (by Taylor in his instructional seminars and literature) to increase productivity and reduce “soldiering” (slacking). Tasks whose execution was once controlled by workers were now redesigned into task segments by managing engineers using time and motion studies. Each worker was assigned specific segments.

Taylor’s famous portrait of the pig-iron handler Schmidt illustrates both the process and the way in which the worker–self was imagined by management pioneers of that era. Characterizing Schmidt as “a man of the mentally sluggish type,” Taylor sees him as an appropriate subject to train to load 47 (as opposed to the usual 12.5) tons of pig iron. Taylor tells him, “If you are a high-priced man, you will do exactly as this man tells you to–morrow from morning till night” (1998:21). With the ideal worker imagined as a blank slate who will internalize work discipline without question for sufficient pay, skill as craft mastery is replaced by what Braverman calls “deskilling”: “The breakup of craft skills and the reconstruction of production as a collective or social process have destroyed the traditional concept of skill and opened up only one way for mastery over labor processes to develop: in and through scientific, technical and engineering knowledge. . . . What is left to workers is a reinterpreted and woefully inadequate concept of skill” (1974:443). This reinterpreted concept of “skill,” which might be inculcated in a few days’ or weeks’ training, remains a central characteristic of a skill as a technique designed by someone other than the user and inculcated into the user through limited training.

Braverman (1974:424) notes the rhetorical convergence of this diluted notion of “skill” with the post–WWII call for a more educated, trained, or skilled workforce—the words are used interchangeably and, he notes, vaguely. That postwar rhetoric brings into focus what Joel Spring (1998) posits as the function of public-education design for a century and more: to inculcate patterns into students with which they will think and act appropriately as workers. Harold Wechsler (1977) provides a 1947 example of such rhetoric from the President’s Commission on Higher Education. With the shift in the U.S. occupational center away from producing industries (Wechsler 1977:153), the commission perceived “a new and rapidly growing need for trained semi-professional workers in these distributive and service occupations” (1977:153). This would call forth, in the commission’s words, “social sensitivity and versatility, artistic ability, motor skill and dexterity, and mechanical aptitude and ingenuity” (Wechsler 1977:153). Thus, the commission issued the first major call for college-level training across the population:

The preservation of American democracy required “a combination of social understanding and technical competence” in its citizens. And it was in a collegiate setting that a student could receive education “for personal and social development” and technical education “that is intensive, accurate and comprehensive enough to give the student command of marketable abilities.” [Wechsler 1977:253]

Such education for citizenship should include, the commission specified, the “acquisition of skills involved in critical and constructive thinking” (Wechsler 1977:254). The commission report marks an important moment in the way skills are conceptualized as soft skills, that is, as parts of
oneself such as social sensitivity and modes of thinking, with those capacities dictated by an inventory of national, social, and market needs.

Since 1980, what the ideal neoliberal worker should internalize has come to be shaped by the needs of the global market, with growing stress on measuring the worker’s capacity to answer those needs and the capacity of educational institutions to produce such workers:

Beginning in 1983 with the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s A Nation at Risk, report after report has proclaimed the necessity of educating students for the global labor market. Each report is written under the patronage of major corporations. Each report demands closer relations between education and the needs of business. Each report demands more measurement and accountability. [Spring 1998:150]

The key elements here are the demands set by the global labor market, the increasing corporate influence on what educators should be doing, and the increasing call for assessment. These are not specifically U.S. considerations. Spring (1998:144) notes that Britain has implemented a skills audit involving four levels of certification and that the European Union has instituted a personal-skills card recording, in the words of EU Commissioner Edith Cresson, the “qualifications or skills outcomes of learning and working periods” (1998:107).

The contemporary workforce operates in what Harvey (1990) calls the post-Fordist regime of “flexible accumulation.” The early- to mid-20th-century Fordist regime, the exemplar of economic modernity, was based on factory production and structured in hierarchic, departmentalized companies organized by management principles ultimately derived from Taylor. Factory-floor jobs were relatively stable, and managers could expect decades-long careers with the same companies. By the early 1970s, the economic dynamics sustaining Fordism were dissolving into a new production and accumulation mode, resting on “flexibility with respect to labor processes, labor markets, products and patterns of consumption and characterized by entirely new sectors of production” (Harvey 1990:147). In such an atmosphere, “access to the latest technique, the latest product, the latest scientific discovery implies the possibility of seizing an important competitive advantage” (Harvey 1990:159). Flexibility, in corporate rhetoric, suggests reduced size, flatter hierarchies, smaller “just-in-time” inventories, a capacity to move materials and products quickly, reliance on global accessibility, and a fluid labor force at all levels. Specialized work once done in-house is outsourced. The more replaceable the labor, the more “flexible” it should be. Emily Martin (1994:145) shows how the flexibility trope is managed:

Firms can be “flexible” in their capacity to downsize; workers should be “flexible” in their skills in case downsizing occurs.

In this regime, the team is the paradigm of productivity. Organizational control is internalized through the reconstitution of expertise and redistribution of worker responsibility in small, impermanent teams. In their critique of new-workplace discourses, Gee and colleagues (1996) examine the preference for expertise (transferable, untied to a particular realm of knowledge) over specialization (the untransferable investment in a particular realm of knowledge) in the flat hierarchies of new capitalism. Each worker should have complementary expertise, allowing for the distribution of control through these systems via the operation of teams facilitated and empowered by leaders-coaches. Top-down management should no longer be in the picture. Minimizing centralized, specialized knowledge minimizes the brain-drain effect when someone leaves the company. Skills valued as discursive techniques and cognitive operations are those of group process: goal setting, problem solving, decision making, and conflict resolution. “Empowered” workers in these new “enchanted workplaces” are seen by new capitalism gurus as a world of workers at all levels bringing their skills together to do a job and cheerfully disbanding when finished.

However, as Gee and colleagues point out in their analysis of terms like “empowerment” and “enchanted workplace” (1996:32–34), even if task distribution is not managed from above, desired outcomes are still controlled by agencies other than those doing the work. Furthermore, workers may be discouraged from internalizing a broad knowledge of organizational specifics, but they are encouraged to internalize organizational identities and ways of operating, the former as organizational culture, the latter as skills. Martin describes this internalization of corporate culture as “an ‘other’ inside managing many parts of the self” (1997:249), an interface between self and organization and a good example of a Foucauldian integration of technologies of self and of power: “The result hoped for is flat, nonhierarchical, fluid, mobile groups linked across interfaces to a myriad of other similar groups and guided by flexible corporate policies about achieving a flexible corporate culture” (1997:251). Skills discourses provide the map for that internalization. “New” workers are seen, and are encouraged to see themselves, as bundles of skills anticipating company needs, readily adaptable and subject to assessment. Whereas Taylorist managers saw workers as passive recipients of job activities designed by experts, new workplace management sees workers actively becoming instruments of job activities designed by experts. But workers are not seen as designing those activities. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the construction of communication skills.
Communication, team, and leadership: The über-skill skills and skills commodities

Communication, leadership, and teamwork have become the defining soft skills, heavily commodified as surefire productive techniques. As such, they represent the technologizing of communication described by Norman Fairclough as organizational discourse practices redesigned by experts for “particular strategies and objectives, usually those of managers or bureaucrats” (1995:91), thence inculcated into organizational personnel. Cameron points out that “the phrase ‘communication skills’ names a cultural construct, not a natural phenomenon with objective existence in the world” (2000:145); the conversion of communication into skills sets reflects a general modernist concern with “knowing how things are or should be done in order to control them and do them better” (2000:7). Monica Heller (2003) similarly describes the recasting of French in Canada from an ethnic language to a skills set tailored for international communication work, vis-à-vis the expansion of the globalized service industry into Canada. Once discursive practices are recast as skill sets, workers who “have” those skills also “have” the responsibility for bringing about outcomes desired by the organizations for which they work. Thus, Glynda Hull (1999) shows how factory supervisors routinely blame production-line misfires on a “lack of English skills” among Filipino, Korean, and Central American workers, even though empirical research reveals a much more complex nexus of events, often including misdirection from native-English-speaking supervisors, leading to such misfires.

This recasting of responsibility onto “empowered” frontline workers is also characteristic of the team approach espoused by the Tom Peters Total Quality Management (TQM) paradigm. For example, Richard Handler and Eric Gable (1997) show the influence of TQM on Colonial Williamsburg management philosophy: All employees at all levels equally work for the customer (“the boss”); the goal of communication in such a structure is to break down barriers between work units and increase efficiency; and the corporation is reimagined as a “team” of individuals, each of whom is responsible for “good communication” in, as Handler and Gable put it, the “charade of the personal” (1997:150).

The notion of “communication” underlying these contemporary work perspectives is strongly legitimated in modernist folk and academic theory; I sketch a few highlights here. Communication itself is a keyword; Williams (1983:72) charts its varying meanings since it first appeared in the 15th century. John Durham Peters (1999) describes 18th- to 19th-century notions of a “perfectable” society in which selves are brought together through the essential goodness of communication into a system of harmony. This took academic form after WWII as “a concept able to unify the natural sciences, the liberal arts, and the social sciences” (Peters 1999:25); it also took form as therapeutic self-expression. During the postwar period of high modernism, the notion of communication as instrumental and therapeutic gained a powerful cultural hold. Tamar Katriel and Gerry Philipsen (1981) posit a U.S. construction of communication as distinct from mere talk by virtue of its capacity to provide useful outcomes and healthy relationships.

The cultural model of therapeutic personal communication and the corporate model of efficient communication draw from and reinforce the academic model of human communication as fundamentally instrumental. Human communication is segmented into interpersonal (dyad), small-group (team), public-speaking, and organizational communication, the latter particularly focusing on optimal information flow, efficient task performance, and predictable outcomes. The process of communication and each of its constituting elements are defined by a distinct purpose, as in this organizational communication textbook definition of verbal communication: “Verbal communication is used in three ways: first, to enhance task accomplishments; second, to make sense out of content; and third, to supply the bridge between myth and reality” (Harris 1993:36).

A human communication textbook defines a small group in terms of purpose: “a number of people who are brought together or who come together voluntarily and who share a common goal, task or purpose” (Wahlstrom 1992:154). Public speaking has two major purposes, as one widely used public speaking text puts it, informing and persuading. The latter an important element of leadership: “Persuasive speaking urges us to choose from among options; informative speaking reveals and clarifies options” (Osborn and Osborn 1994:359), and “the persuasive speaker is a leader: the informative speaker is a teacher. … Persuasive speaking more often depends on exciting emotion than does informative speaking. … Persuasive speakers often appeal to groups: informative speakers usually address listeners as individuals” (Osborn and Osborn 1994:360–361).

This sketch demonstrates two points. The first is what Silverstein and Greg Urban describe as entextualization, “precipitates of continuous cultural processes” through which those inscribing them “create a seemingly shareable, transmittable culture” (1996:2). The construction of communication (or any) skill as cultural object, and as commodity, depends on the institutional production of textbooks, instructional manuals, exercises, and assessment sheets, all of which entextualize aspects of communication. Without these, communication could not be segmented and rationalized, the segments providing saleable techniques and the rationales (instrumentality, purpose, and outcome predictability) providing use-value. Equally important, entextualization makes communication, skills,
and affiliated concepts available as SDSs. Their status as such and as objects of commodification are mutually reinforcing.

The second point is that, as Judith Irvine (1989) has observed, when linguistic practices operate as commodities, they are indexically saturated by the social ideologies with which they have been associated as well as by (as is true of all commodity production) the conditions under which they have been produced. Of particular relevance in this regard is the production of use-value, described by Martyn Lee (1993:22, taking his cue from Bourdieu 1977) as socially emergent. By socially emergent, I mean that the perception of use-value at any given moment depends on the user’s perspective as framed socially and historically and is, thus, a function of social relations. This is the basis of the example of the coat-linen exchange that Karl Marx uses in Capital (1970), in which two people engage in a trade of one coat for several yards of linen. To each person in the exchange, the thing desired is the thing that has use-value, and the thing offered in exchange is the thing with exchange-value.

As David Graeber (2001:100) explains, although both participants in the transaction see the items as equivalent in value, each perceives that equivalence in terms of what each wants from the exchange, the specific qualities of the coat or the specific qualities of the linen. The item offered in exchange is an abstraction, a means to get the desired object. Use- and exchange-value are, thus, mutually constituted and are, thus, both socially constituted, each depending on the perspective of the person involved. For Marx, this is true of all transactions, including those involving the exchange of money for commodities. Interpreting Marx’s notion of “use-value” is by no means a clear-cut enterprise, and there is a range of Marxist approaches to use-value, most commonly that it characterizes nonmarket systems of exchanges or that it lies between the object and the person and, thus, unlike exchange-value, is not socially constituted. However, Marx does seem to have considered use-value in many ways, among them, as his discussion of the coat-linen exchange indicates, as a socially constituted relation. William Roseberry (1977:33) argues that, although Marx did not fully develop a social theory of use-value, he did open the door to what has since emerged as an anthropological analysis of commodification.

If use-value is socially constituted, it can take on social meaning. Part of the problem in conceptualizing the social meaning of use-value stems from the fact that, as Lee (1993:16) notes, consumer culture flowered after Marx died. As Sut Jhally puts it, “Marx never confronted the issues regarding symbolism, consumption and advertising that are of concern to us here” (1987:20). Jhally rethinks Marx’s notion of “use-value” to include the role of advertising. Marx’s classic explanation of commodity fetishism is that exchange-value, defined entirely by market relations, mystifies the social relations involved in commodity production. Jhally (1987:29) argues that, if fetishism means investing a product with inherent meaning rather than recognizing that meaning proceeds from the system through which it is constituted, fetishism extends into use-value: The production process empties goods of “the signature of their makers,” and advertising fills them with new meaning that appears inherent in the product (Jhally 1987:50–51). This fetishism is furthered by consumers’ near-absolute belief in technology as logical and natural (Jhally 1987:199).

This is what happens when promotional discourses assign use-value to communication skills. As Cameron (2000) has shown, such fetishized forms of practice are not freely initiated by individuals but are techniques designed and inculcated by experts. Such experts, credentialed by advanced degrees in communication or related fields, provide testimonials guaranteeing that these techniques (in effect, technologies of self) can streamline production and enhance profit. The discourses promoting them, thus, exploit faith in (social) technology, a faith that also drives the enrollment of these terms as SDSs, which are, in turn, part of the process of their own commodity fetishism. The indexical deployment of these referring expressions in corporate discourses, their use in promotional discourse, and their fetishized reification as products keep folding back into each other. To see how this works, I examine the use-value attributed to communication, team, and leadership products.

The college course most fetishized as conferring a communication skill is public speaking, to which generations of (particularly, male) graduates attribute their success (generally without considering the linguistic or symbolic capital provided by gender, class, or other habitus-based elements). Public speaking is commodified as presentation skills, with its use-value in its promise of self-transformation and increased profit (economic or symbolic). The Clear Communication Company (staff of four) offers 18 seminars and workshops based on public-speaking techniques, including “Public Speaking,” “Presentation Skills,” “Communicate Better in between Speeches and Presentations (for the Golf and Hospitality Industry, and for Business and Organizations),” “The Deal Makers Workshop,” “International Presentation Skills: When English Is Your Second Language,” “Communicate Upward in your Organization,” and “Communicate with the Japanese.” Promotional copy for Executive Speech Coaching workshop stresses the equation of self, work, and communicative success: “As an executive, you are an ambassador and a spokesperson for your company. The company will be known and judged in large measure by the trust and confidence which you generate. . . . You will be known and judged—first and foremost—by your communication skills” (Clear Communication Company n.d.b). The workshop promises transferable skills guaranteed to make that equation work:
The purpose of presentation skills coaching is to make certain that your communication skills, both in content and style, are of the highest quality. We believe that quality communication skills can be learned, and that good communicators are not born that way. Our method is to unlock your personal and professional potential and to begin a new process of continuing development and growth. We will assist and develop you; we will not re-make you. We will fine-tune your style and help you focus your energy. [Clear Communication Company n.d.b]

Executives are leaders, a status recognized by the promise to “develop” or “unlock” potential but not “remake you.” Respect for leader–executive subjectivity (the potential consumer of the service is addressed as “you”) contrasts with the relatively objective status of the team (often referred to as “your team”), with stress on relatively direct inculcation. This pattern is evident in the websites cited throughout this article. Public-speaking and presentation-skills training promises specific techniques, for example, for handling difficult questions and answers, making eye contact, using visuals, and so on; the training is noticeably more grounded in specific techniques than in team-leadership skills. Those who offer such training tout their own expertise as communicators. Clear Communication’s president is “an internationally recognized speaker who is one of our nations [sic] experts on communication. Educated in his native Texas, with graduate study in advanced communications, he received an honorary doctoral degree in 1976” (Clear Communication Company n.d.a). His expert authority is further grounded by his authorship of two books on effective presentation, his hefty fee structure (full-day sessions run $4,000–$6,000, half-day $2,500–$3,500, and keynote speaking $7,500–$10,000), and testimonials from satisfied clients (Clear Communication Company n.d.a, n.d.c).

The rethinking of the workplace as flat was accompanied by a rethinking of manager–employee relations as leader–team relations. As concepts, “team” and “leadership” have grown out of the field of human communication and into distinct academic and applied fields with extensive literatures. Teams accomplish tasks and leaders oversee team productivity. Team members should be self-motivated, taking their company’s interest to heart; the leader’s job is to “make it so.” Leadership-skills material is often self-help in form. Leadership-skills websites routinely promote books such as Stephen Covey’s Seven Habits of Highly Effective People (1989; followed by several spin-offs). Workshops for leadership training offer (in addition to communication skills, esp. listening): decision making, performance management, time management, motivation, and conflict management. White Stag Junior Leader Training promises to inculcate:

- Getting and Giving Information
- Understanding Group Needs and Characteristics
- Knowing and Understanding Group Resources
- Controlling the Group
- Counseling
- Setting the Example
- Representing the Group
- Problem-Solving
- Evaluation
- Sharing Leadership
- Sharing Leadership
- Manager of Learning [1998–2007]

Everest Leadership Training’s “core workshops to develop critical leadership skills” promise that,

at the conclusion of our leadership skills workshops managers, supervisors and team leaders will be able to: Communicate “passion” for a project without being stubborn; Use emotional intelligence to neutralize the other person’s emotional reaction; Help others act and respond in an emotionally intelligent way; Successfully delegate decision making to empower the team members; Recognize the importance of character, competence and practices in a leader; Distinguish rational vs. emotional motivational triggers; Apply the TEAM approach: Teach, Empower, Accountable, Model; Articulate a “cause” or mission of the unit as a rally point; Describe how credibility and trust affect leadership abilities and how to enhance these perceptions. [n.d.]

Unlike communication skills, most of the leadership skills in these lists cannot be described as techniques or discrete practices; they are a disparate mix of practices, techniques, cognitive operations, and attitudes; they are also exhortative, as are team skills (see below). Given this referential indefiniteness, the SDS function of leadership skills is especially critical in establishing the use-value of these training products.

Team training promises optimal labor coordination resulting in higher productivity and personal transformation of sorts, although those being transformed are not directly addressed by the writers of the promotional copy. The New and Improved company “create(s) growth through innovation by helping groups of individuals think creatively and work productively together”: “We work with you to create Innovation Teams that work towards creative solutions that yield results. How do we do that? By creating programs and organizational interventions that provide new skills, methods, techniques and approaches to the work your people do and the challenges they face” (New and Improved 2005a).

In this team development copy, the use of skills parallels, and is sometimes interchangeable with, attitudes, methods, techniques, approaches, and tools. The copy routinely includes exhortative messages, as in “Developing Innovation Teams: Individuals Working Together To Create Value”: 

"..."
Purpose: Intense and impactful [sic], this course teaches participants the tools, techniques, attitudes and behaviors that are critical to the kind of teamwork that seeks innovative solutions.

One person can make a difference. But we live in a world of work groups, task forces and innovation teams. This highly active and interactive program provides teams with the skills, attitudes and tools to work together more innovatively and productively, with a dramatic reduction in non-productive communication. By teaching a cycle based on key internal leadership themes (as detailed in the book *More Lightning, Less Thunder: How To Energize Innovation Teams*), this course helps individuals develop the behaviors necessary to make a positive contribution. [New and Improved 2005b]

“Develop the behaviors necessary to make a positive contribution” pretty much sums up the point of this inculcation of technologies of self.

Because listening skills are central to both group and leadership training, and because they are a particularly interesting example of a routine social action technologized into a soft skill, I examine how they are segmented and inculcated. Steiger Training and Development (1999–2006) offers a series of “High Performance Training Programs” in modules of a half day, three days, or five days. These include “Leadership Communication Skills for High Performance” and “High Performance Skills for Team Members,” both subdivided into further modules beginning with a half-day prerequisite, “High Performance Listening Skills.” The Leadership Communication Listening Skills workbook first asks participants to list problems faced at work. Participants are then asked to describe in writing how they would respond to a list of possible work situations. The workbook then provides a flow chart of interpersonal effectiveness skills (e.g., advocacy, inquiry, and understanding) followed by a definition of *listening*, a description of what listening is not, suggestions for getting team members to talk about their problems, and lists of “focusing skills” (body language and situational features) and “tracking skills” (encouraging gambits) to keep them talking.

This is followed by reflection exercises: a definition of *reflection* (stating in one’s own words what a speaker just communicated), directions on how and what to reflect, and instructions for a group exercise in reflecting. Participants then apply the “skills” they have learned to one of the work problems listed at the beginning of the session and engage in self-assessment in the form of questions about their own strengths and areas for further development. Participants subsequently observe a dyad talking and listening, provide feedback to the duo, and fill out a worksheet showing what the two did or did not do. This is followed by consideration of a list of barriers to communication (judgment, ignoring feelings, taking over), diagrams and flow charts about managing performance (defined as the establishment of mutual respect, trust, and freedom of expression), and the issue of questions (how to ask, what kinds of questions), followed by questioning practice and self-assessment. Finally, participants are instructed to reframe the work issue on which they have focused from problem to goal, the “solve” step is defined, and they are given a flow chart on offering input.

Listening-skills training depends on the redefinition of the act of listening as pieces of purposeful emotional labor (Cameron 2000:68ff.): attention to a speaker with intent to demonstrate understanding through empathy, acceptance, and congruence. This further depends on entextualization, through visual aids (lists and flow charts) establishing cause and effect and by paralleling disparate elements: Skills include advocacy, inquiry, and the use of certain phrases (discursive actions); understanding (cognitive process); body language (physical action); and cultivating privacy and minimal distractions (situational features). Internalization (insofar as it happens) takes place by participation in entextualization—making lists, writing down responses, and making assessments. Ideally, one internalizes not just the techniques but an attitude, which one is said to “own.” One might, however, end up owning it in ways not planned for in the training design. Two of my acquaintances who took listening-skills workshops through their companies noted the tendency of the training to disconnect specific techniques from actual tasks. They also noted the priority given to workshop concepts over participants’ own knowledge. As one acquaintance put it, she felt encouraged to “keep checking the blueprint” rather than trusting her own instincts.

Conclusion

The neoliberalism joke:

**Marxist:** “The workers have nothing to sell but their labour power”

**Neoliberal:** “I offer courses on How to Sell Your Labour Power Like A Shark”

—Treasor 2005

The corporate values justifying soft-skills inculcation, especially communication, team, and leadership skills, look a lot like what Chakrabarty (2000:666–669), in his discussion of Marx and the logic of capital, describes as the specific despotism of capitalism: not the sheer physical labor but the manner in which labor is organized as an activity. The capitalist does not buy a fixed amount of labor but a capacity for labor, which has now come to include a self reimagined as an internalized skills set. The distinction between
communication as über-soft skill and communication as ordinary, open-ended social activity parallels Chakrabarty’s distinction between History 1 (which capitalism sees as its necessary precondition) and History 2 (which includes all those elements capitalism does not regard as necessary or intrinsic to its interests). The logic of capital lies in the continual importance of subjugating the second to the first. That project would include reforming worker subjectivity through inculcation of those technologies of self that support profit interests and (the neoliberal twist) persuading workers that this is right, natural, and empowering.

In skills discourses, social acts are recast in a transactional or entrepreneurial frame and actors’ segmented selves are recast as assemblages of productive elements, as bundles of skills. All these aspects of social action and personhood are skills insofar as they are divorced from their users’ everyday social context and recast, entextualized, inculcated, and assessed by experts for work applications. They are commensurable as commodities insofar as they are aspects of productive labor with market value: as aspects of self that enhance their possessors’ worth on the labor market and as products sold by their inculcators, who command hefty fees for some hours or days of skills workshops.24 Skills discourses naturalize this commodification process, making it unproblematic to talk about such value and increasingly possible for everyone in or entering the labor market to take for granted this way of being. Skills discourses structure the conditions under which workers are recruited into the labor market, and they structure the conditions under which new labor recruits imagine themselves as workers. The semiotic features of skills discourse—skills terms as semantically vacuous count nouns, the alignment functions characterizing their use, the loose associational chains by which they are indexically ordered—are instrumental in the construction of skills as commodities and in the creation of a market for them.

As Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) noted long ago regarding time reference, much human experience has no discrete form. People give linguistic form to the inchoate through the synergy of grammaticalization and what Whorf called “fashions of speaking,” now understood as indexically embedded discursive processes. This happens all the time, in the form of enregisterment. As new registers form, they form not only words but also semiotic functions, which only emerge discursively. In skills discourses, those functions are often manifested as acts of persuasion. Reinforcing and reinforced by market forces, their effect comes to seem not only natural but also unavoidable, even morally imperative.

There is never a sense of “try this technique, it might work” but, rather, “these skills will get you these outcomes and you should acquire them” and “this is who you should be.” This discourse reflects what Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff describe as the “messianic, salvific, even magical manifestations” (2004:177) of neoliberalism and millennial capitalism. Or, as Pierre Bourdieu put it in a 1998 Le Monde Diplomatique article, “Thus we see how the neoliberal utopia tends to embody itself in the reality of a kind of infernal machine, whose necessity imposes itself even upon the rulers … this utopia evokes powerful belief—the free trade faith.”

Is everyone persuaded? No.25 But enough are. A lot of companies buy skills-development products, a lot of employers believe in them, and a lot of workers probably do as well, and a lot of workers do not have a lot of choice as to whether they believe or not.

Notes

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1. The lecture was delivered at Hamilton College, on October 24, 2005.

2. Or in pounds or euros. I focus in this article on the United States, but the phenomena analyzed saturate the world of contemporary capitalism, especially in the United Kingdom and the European Union.

3. Thanks to Chaise LaDousa for the insightful notion of “loose associational chains.”

4. David Paris (1998) argues that the notion of “what works,” that is, specific educational practices with predictable outcomes, may derive as much from the will to believe as from objective evidence.

5. The term strategically deployable shifter was suggested to me by Michael Silverstein.

6. Roman Jakobson (1957) examined tense, mood, and other verb morphemes as shifters; Emile Benveniste (1971) similarly examined personal pronouns as “duplex signs” or “empty signifiers.”

7. I have analyzed the routine co-occurrence of skills and communication with “excellence, leadership, and diversity” in higher education administrative discourses (Urciuoli 2003); the function of skills and assessment in legislators’ demands for higher education assessment (Urciuoli 2005a); and the ways in which skills and diversity have found their way into residential life, student life, and college recruitment discourses (Urciuoli 2005b).

8. A cautionary tale: In her paper presentation at the 106th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, D.C., November 28–December 2, 2007, Shana Walton described a workshop she designed for K–12 teachers, to help them incorporate linguistic ethnography into classrooms to enhance teaching outcomes. In describing the problems of recasting complex linguistic anthropology concepts and methods as practices that can be readily learned and applied by teachers facing a world defined by test scores, she echoes some of the decontextualization and assessment issues involved in the construction of communication skills.

9. Foucault posits four major types of technologies as matrices of practical reason in the modern world: technologies of production (of material goods); of sign systems; of power, “which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject”; and of self, “which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform
themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (1988:18). These technologies function in relation to each other: Skills discourses nest technologies of self in technologies of power.

10. In a study of undergraduate perception of writing, communicating orally, and using quantitative tools, Shauna Sweet (2004) found that students had a different sense of how each of these capacities was learned or who could learn them, but she did routinely refer to all three as skills.


12. JoAnne Yates (1989) finds communication emerging during the same era as a property of complex business relations and processes. Technology, communication, and efficiency probably all emerged as SDSs in the same process of enregisterment in this era.

13. The construction of order and efficiency has long been a concern of business rhetoric. In their study of the centuries-long history of double-entry bookkeeping, Bruce Carruthers and Wendy Nelson Espeland (1991) argue that it provided a rhetorical frame for transforming the notion of “commerce” into a just and legitimate enterprise. Melissa Cecilin and Jeanette Blomberg (2005) analyze the capacity for “pipeline” review meetings to classify, quantify, and order the unruliness of business practice into coherent and persuasive sales forecasting.

14. These texts routinely conflate overt, intentional purpose with function. This is the central difference between communication as presented in these texts and semiotic analyses of communicative function that stress multifunctionality and indeterminacy of outcome; see, for example, Jakobson 1960 and Silverstein 1976. For an excellent linguistic anthropological study of actual, complex, ambiguous communication in a corporate setting, see Wasson 2004.

15. Communication skills are generated by sociohistorical institutional dynamics comparable to those generating standard languages. Like standardization, skills reflect the “institutional maintenance of certain valued linguistic practices—in theory fixed,” which acquire “an explicitly-recognized hegemony over the definition of the community’s norm” (Silverstein 1987:2). In other words, skills and standards both represent what people are told they should unvaryingly do, not what they themselves actually, and variably, do.

16. Many thanks to Ilana Gershon and Henry Rutz for helping me work through this section.

17. Until 1969, my college, then all male, required public speaking, and, as our website puts it, “alumni over a certain age tend to recall the four-year public speaking requirement with the pride and nostalgia of military veterans who have somehow managed to survive the conflict” (Trustees of Hamilton College 2007). The course was believed central to the transformation of the college youth into citizens and, as our website puts it, “alumni over a certain age tend to recall the four-year public speaking requirement with the pride and nostalgia of military veterans who have somehow managed to survive the conflict” (Trustees of Hamilton College 2007). The course was believed central to the transformation of the college youth into citizens.

18. The field of management has its own professional organizations to develop, disseminate, and provide training in techniques for overseeing employees. The oldest, the American Management Association (AMA), began in 1913 as the National Association of Corporate Schools (Schools was later replaced by Training). As its mission statement explains, it “provides managers and their organizations worldwide with the knowledge, skills, and tools they need to improve business performance, adapt to a changing workplace and prosper in a complex and competitive business world” (American Management Association 1997–2007). The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) began “during a training committee meeting of the American Petroleum Institute in 1942” (American Society for Training and Development 2007a). The ASTD states as its mission, “Through exceptional learning and performance, we create a world that works better.” It states as its vision, “To be a world-wide leader in workplace learning and performance” (American Society for Training and Development 2007b). Many thanks to Susan Mason for framing this history.

19. Yes, this is a reference to Captain Jean-Luc Picard’s signature phrase in Star Trek: The Next Generation, as perfect an illustration of the team–leadership concept as one might hope to find.

20. Covey’s habits are:

1. Be Proactive: Principles of Personal Vision
2. Begin with the End in Mind: Principles of Personal Leadership
4. Think Win/Win: Principles of Interpersonal Leadership
5. Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood: Principles of Empathetic Communication
6. Synergize: Principles of Creative Communication

Covey does not list these as skills, but they do get tucked under that rubric, as in the course offered at the University of California, Santa Barbara Leadership SkillsMap Institute (n.d.) on “Rethinking Leadership: Covey’s Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.”

21. The website says that the skills are the same in both modules but that the applications are customized. I had access to this workbook through an acquaintance whose company purchased the workshop.

22. The same person said that, although she was generally skeptical about such training, she had picked up a few useful pointers and that, for people with little feeling for interaction or confidence in their own judgment, such workshops may be helpful. She also noted that everything seems to have become a skill for which companies need consultants, so that many companies routinely budget for them.

23. Treanor’s website offers a comprehensive discussion of the history and nature of neoliberalism.

24. Espeland and Mitchell Stevens describe commodification as an “expression . . . of characteristics normally represented by different units according to a common metric,” a process they consider social and “inherently interpretive and deeply political” (1998:315). They also note it can change the terms of what can be talked about, which is certainly a performative outcome of skills discourses.

25. I presented a few of these texts to my spring 2007 introduction to linguistic anthropology class for Whorfian analysis, and I found quite a few nonbelievers. My favorite nonbeliever story is from a student who said, as she was about to graduate, that she found this an “estranged rhetoric” that “some can assimilate, but I just dodge it.”

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