

Kerry Harman (Birkbeck, University of London)

Presentation title: Learning at work as the embodiment and activation of discourse

k.harman@bbk.ac.uk

This presentation explores the usefulness of a Foucauldian conceptualization of processes of subjectification for understanding learning in and through every day practices at work. A Foucauldian poststructuralist approach draws attention to the discursive mechanisms whereby people are turned into and turn themselves into subjects. This process is theorized by Foucault as the interplay of technologies of power with technologies of the self (Rose, 1996, 1999a). This perspective provides an account of subjectivity as integrally interrelated with power and knowledge, thereby challenging a prevailing view in much of the organizational learning and workplace learning literature of subjectivity as autonomous and language as reflecting a pre-existing organisational reality. Importantly, a Foucauldian perspective enables power to be introduced into accounts of learning at work but in a way that avoids reproducing a top-down and monolithic view of power. It provides the analytic space for re-presenting workplace learners as active in the ongoing negotiation of identity, rather than only acted on by top down forces, but in a way that moves beyond taking the centred subject of humanism as a starting point.

Kerry Harman is Programme Director for Higher Education Introduction Studies (HEIS) at Birkbeck. HEIS is a multidisciplinary programme providing access to HE for students with non-traditional academic qualifications. Her research interest is in the interrelationships between workplace practices, knowledges, power and worker subjectivity. This is connected with an interest in developing methods that enable the ongoing identity work that takes place in and through everyday workplace practices to be made visible. This strand of research has implications in terms of how workplace learning might be understood, recognised and assessed. She is also interested in the contemporary intersections between workplaces and higher education institutions and the material effects of the movement of knowledges across these institutional domains.