Chapter 2
Opening up a World of Literature at Toshiba

The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious, one begins to examine the society in which he is educated.

—James Baldwin

Abstract The happy, productive and healthy company is a corporate objective. Despite the misgivings expressed by some at Toshiba, on the whole employees seemed content and productive, yet there was a level of dissatisfaction with the then present practice. In this chapter I demonstrate how I used literature to help students learn more about work and themselves. I aim to reveal the relationship between learning and confidence and to explore how literature can support students in making a more substantial contribution to their organisations. If reflection is a fundamental requirement in high quality work, the capacity for reflection is nurtured by literature. The ability to deliver results, to possess commercial and business awareness, to work successfully in a team are all qualities encouraged throughout one’s working life. My contention is that reflection on literature creates that breakthrough moment in students, that perception of themselves as confident professionals who can finally match their know-how to theory: students can use literature to become more reflective learners and employees. This chapter also describes how James Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son” can be used to help students explore style and voice as well as socio-cultural issues such as racism and exclusion.
Introduction

In the spring of 2011 I began work with a half a dozen students from the Toshiba Tec Corporation based at the company’s UK headquarters in Chertsey, Surrey.¹ These Toshiba employees were chosen to undertake the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development because of their critical positions in Human Resources, Operations, Marketing and Sales. They were to be “Ambassadors of Change”, charged with effecting a culture of transformation at Toshiba and had been selected by the Head of Human Resources Mags Thomas to examine the challenges of staff behaviour and performance. The aim of the certificate was to provide these key people with the self-awareness and skills to enable them to drive change within their own environments and for the organisation both within their own teams and across the business. The desire for change, evidenced by the selection of these “ambassadors”, strongly implies that there had been deep-rooted problems at Toshiba that needed to be addressed, but from my own conversations with Mags and the students, I discovered that these problems were no more serious than the day to day challenges faced by any other organisation: “people don’t say what they need to say”; “gossip is rife here”; “there are definite communication issues”. Granted, the issues that Toshiba faced were of a particular complexion: communication, or lack thereof, seemed to be the principal bone of contention at Toshiba, just in the same way as other companies struggle with IT, aggressive management, unfair distribution of workloads. There are as many petty problems as there are companies. If I may offer a variation on an axiom formulated by Tolstoy in the opening of Anna Karenina: all happy companies resemble one another; each unhappy company is unhappy in its own way. The happy, productive and healthy company is a corporate objective. Despite the misgivings expressed by some at Toshiba, on the whole, employees seemed content, productive and healthy. But appearances count for little: as Paul Gibbs (2013, p. 3) points out “the workplace is never homogeneous but messy, complex and multilayered”. Like Tolstoy’s unhappy families, all is never quite what it seems.

The desire for change at Toshiba emerged from a level of dissatisfaction with the then present practice. Mags saw the work based learning curriculum as a means of changing the culture at Toshiba. I saw the work based learning curriculum as a means of introducing Toshiba students to the world of literature. What occurred in 2011 between the students and me has had significant consequences at Toshiba. The company has now introduced the first industry Master’s degree in sales appreciation to help people learn the art of sales to a professional standard, and, in Mags’ words “an industry leading piece of work based learning is going on”.² Toshiba is changing

¹Toshiba Tec Corporation is a division of Toshiba that specialises in providing retail solutions, principally photocopying and printing. In this Chap. I subsequently refer to this company simply as Toshiba. The origins of the course and its structure will be delineated in the appendix, as will any other relevant course or programme structures.
²Separate hour long interviews with Mags Thomas and the students were conducted a year after not only the module but subsequent seminar discussions had finished.
for the better because “the quality of thinking” has improved skills and professionalism. Mags is in no doubt that “the performance of every individual who has been through [the certificate] has increased”.

Drawing on essays examining the centrality of work to our identity as well as on Ron Barnett’s work on will, Robert Coles’ work on writing and voice and Elizabeth Anne Kinsella and Allan Pitmann’s seminal work on phronesis, I will demonstrate how I used literature to help students learn more about their work and themselves. I aim to reveal the relationship between learning and confidence and to explore how literature can support students in making a more substantial contribution to their organisations.

Background and Definitions

Before providing the background and context for my work with the Toshiba students, I would like to focus on definitions of terms that will be used in this chapter and in subsequent ones. As my claim is to improve workplace learning by teaching literature, it is imperative that I define precisely what I mean by “literature”. According to the primary entry in the Oxford English Dictionary literature is defined as “written works, especially those regarded as having artistic merit; knowledge acquired from reading or studying books, especially the principal classical texts associated with human learning; literary culture, learning, scholarship”. Further definitions include letters, books, printed matter of any kind (leaflets, brochures, advertisements) and written work valued for lasting artistic merit (OED 2012). The final definition—written work valued for lasting artistic merit—will be more applicable to the work I did with other cohorts, in particular, individual Masters and Professional Doctoral students.

With the Toshiba students I concentrated on articles from academic journals, particularly those on organisational change and books such as Peter Senge’s The Dance of Change and Donald Schön’s The Reflective Practitioner. The students were encouraged to explore the theories of John Dewey and Kurt Lewin, and all kept learning logs to record their observations and thoughts on their learning journeys.

Derek Attridge (2004, p. 13) broadly divides literature into two categories: the first, a more “literary” literature, distinguished by its complex handling of language and linguistic and stylistic aesthetics and the second, a more “instrumentalist” literature, in the light of a pre-existing set of assumptions, values, and goals that derive from the social and political realm”. Although my focus with the Toshiba students was on the latter, the more “instrumentalist” type of literature, I believe that this kind of writing, although not literary in the sense outlined by Attridge, was effective in broadening their minds, challenging their ideological assumptions and alerting them to linguistic effects. Furthermore, at a time when “the crisis of the humanities” seems to be deepening, and there is urgency about “how we can talk about the value and the relevance of the humanities today” (Belfiore and Upchurch 2013, p. 6), I succeeded in exposing students to the meaning-making practices of human culture.
If the humanities are the “cultural bedrock of a democratic polity” (Small 2013, p. 126), I can claim that in my modest way I have helped to contribute to the health of democracy. We can discern in Mags’ words the essence of a democratic organisation:

Now, [after completing their academic work] all of them come to me with business wide concepts and ideas and programmes, whereas before, they tended to be very narrowly focussed. They encourage their colleagues to use the skill sets too of the learning disciplines they gained from doing their study. You can see that [knowledge] gets shared around.

The sharing of ideas, thinking broadly about the benefit of the organisation as a whole, collaborative working: all of these attributes appear to have been fostered by the work I did with these students. An emphasis on the humanities made them more attuned to each other’s working practices. But how did this happen in practice?

When I was introduced to the programme of working with Toshiba, I concentrated on the freedom it afforded me rather than on the constraints it could have imposed. It might be helpful if I summarise the programme agreement. The overview of the organisation’s learning requirements stated that Toshiba “was looking for an alternative to staff development through appraisals as well as to introduce changes in staff behaviour and performance”. This would be an undergraduate project module, which would be delivered over two university terms. The stated objective was to provide a group of “key people with the self-awareness and skills to enable them to drive change” across the business. The assessment strategies consisted of learning log extracts, a SWOT analysis4 and a reflective essay. After meeting the students at Toshiba’s offices in Chertsey and being impressed by their enthusiasm for learning and eagerness to explore their practice, I decided to focus intensely on the learning log aspect of the programme of study. The logs were divided into different sections under the following headings: date; noteworthy conversations, insights, reflections; an examination of conversations, meetings and ethical issues; and, most importantly, links to theories, reading, research, which could shed light on an event. For example, James observed tension between two key people in his department. To James, this tension appeared un-resolvable. In his final column he linked his observation with something applicable that he had read from Lewin: “Lewin (1951) views behaviour as a dynamic balance of forces working in opposing directions”. I had encouraged the students to elaborate on as well as offer strategies, solutions and a rationale for their thinking.

Initially the students were expected to concentrate on workbook exercises. I designed and expanded the learning log to encourage their reading and research, to get them accustomed to exploring literature, which was and has always been my primary goal with work based learning students (see Eastman 2013, 2014). In order to illustrate this fully, I will provide information from an actual learning log. On 4 February 2011 Karl noted a conversation at a team meeting concerning the reporting

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3The programme of activities for this group had been written before I started working for the Institute for Work Based Learning. I will refer to it in the appendix.

4SWOT is a structured planning method used to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in a project.
of statistics. In “noteworthy conversations” he reported that Technician X was “very negative towards the stats, thinking that they were a ‘waste of time’”. In the “examination of conversations” column, Karl wrote that he explained to Technician X that his region had the best figures in the company and that he took time to explain to Technician X how the figures were produced, what they were based on and how beneficial they were. In his final column, linking his observations to his research, Karl was particularly expansive:

Technician X is always very resistant to change and has complex needs which are probably never, ever going to be met by Toshiba. However, as Burnes (2009) suggests: people are emotional rather than economic-rational beings. I have explored his individual needs. As an employee, he does so much good work then destroys that work with one negative statement. His work is excellent but his attitude restricts his progress. I think that Technician X will eventually take note of the standards that are required. He has put himself into an awkward position and now must change permanently in order to achieve the levels of workmanship that Toshiba requires. As a manager I feel I have given him every opportunity to make these changes. He has been unfrozen – moved and re-frozen – in Lewin’s words. My question is: will the fridge remain cold enough to keep Technician X where he is required to be?

With a touch of humour Karl reflects on his exchanges with Technician X. He justifies his behaviour using academic research and examines his duty as a manager with regard to managerial theories. This level of deep reflection is what Toshiba’s “Ambassadors of Change” were aiming for. Change requires a profound understanding of one’s current situation, and this is precisely what Karl was achieving in his learning log, grounding his empirical observations in the relevant theories he had come across in his research, which allowed him to illuminate his own conduct and that of others. A colleague of mine from the Institute for Work Based Learning at Middlesex expressed amazement at the work James, Karl and the others were producing. The assumption is that we should not expect such an in-depth engagement with literature from students who have had hitherto little to no experience of academic study. If we take as a given that the workplace is not organised as a place for learning, this level of reflection and engagement with literature is all the more extraordinary.

As Lum (2013, p. 31) points out in his relevant criticism of on-the-job learning provision, the fault lies with “the modern pre-occupation with ‘learning outcomes’, ‘competences/skills’ and all similar nomenclature associated with the bureaucratic compulsion to specify, measure and control”. Not only must we never underestimate our students’ potential, we need to encourage them to develop their voices and to recognise the authority inherent in using their voices to articulate their distinctive positions in the workplace. Our goal as teachers is to get students to see that they have vested positions in an organisation, and their emerging voices can consolidate their authority as valuable members of that organisation.
Work, Identity and Reflection

The reflective aspect of work based learning has been comprehensively explored (Brookfield 1987; Dewey 2007; Kolb 1984; Schön 1991), so this is not the place to investigate the role of reflection in any great depth. However, it would be remiss of me not to discuss how the students used reflection in their practice. One of the students, Ian, puts it quite simply: “I reflect a bit more on situations now rather than just doing (a task) and moving onto the next one. I now think more about what went well or didn’t go as well as I hoped and what I can do the next time.” Ian’s statement about reflection echoes the hundreds of statements about the importance of reflection that students have reported to me during the course of working with businesses. The idea of reflection definitely captures their interest, probably more than any other academic concept they examine. Winch (2013, p. 10) looks for a working definition of the workplace in the modern sense of earning a wage and decides that it is the site of an “agency” where “goods and services” are produced “with a view to remuneration”. He concludes that the workplace is not “organised primarily for learning” (p. 11). This observation is important because it illuminates the reason why so many students find the secret to self-efficacy and confidence in reflecting on how and why they are able to manage an array of situations. Ian discussed his new way of working: “The way I work with the guys now is different. I think a bit more and I reflect on things. I now go back and think about how things could have been done better, whereas before I would have just moved onto the next task”. Reflection appears to be a cornerstone of learning for students.

In his study of the transition of university graduates into full-time employment, Hinchcliffe (2013, p. 60) argues that the acquisition of skills, techniques and knowledge is simply not sufficient for individuals to manage their new occupation roles. Employers are looking for the ability to deliver results from graduates who can demonstrate the ability to intellectualise, think critically, problem solve creatively, communicate information clearly and be reflective. In fact, reflection is one of “the fundamental requirements” of employees, suggesting that the graduate “can operate well within a team and with clients, identify development and training needs and assess the efficacy of their own work”.

Hinchcliffe is looking at the qualities valued in graduates and at employers’ expectations of graduates. In work based learning programmes I have been working with people who, for the most part, have had little or no formal academic experience in higher education. Yet I find that these employees who have had little formal academic training share with university graduates a paucity of reflective skills. Reflection is not built into undergraduate degrees in the same way as it is a work based learning syllabus. Reflection is the cornerstone of what we practitioners of work based learning encourage in our students. Students that graduate from work based learning programmes appear to have the capacity for deep reflection that employers demand. If reflection is, as Hinchcliffe sustains, one of employers’ “fundamental requirements” (2013, p. 60), work based learning offers the means to instil this quality in not only graduates entering the business, but also those already
decades into the business. This capacity for reflection, I contend, is nurtured by literature. The ability to deliver results, to present ideas clearly, to possess commercial and business awareness, to work successfully in a team are all qualities recognised at the threshold of employment as well as throughout one’s work life. For those employees who have not had the benefit of a formal academic education and presumably attendant exposure to critical thinking and formalised intellectual engagement, it is their reflection on literature that creates that breakthrough moment, that perception of themselves as confident professionals who can finally match their know-how to theory.

If we return to Karl’s learning-log, we see how the marriage of know-how with the reflection on literature can work. Karl discusses a situation in which different departments do not appear to be committed to assisting each other:

I was miffed that my region was short of technicians because several were doing work that should be covered by [another department]. Surely if they cannot cope, then we have a recruitment need. The situation that I found to have imposed on me as a manager has not been openly discussed at our various meetings. It has simply been assumed that if [this department] cannot cope then we will commit to helping them out. I think that with a more consultative approach all of our teams would be more committed to assisting each other by having a common goal.

Here is the workplace as a site of frustration that calls to mind Gibbs’ (2013: 3) description of it as “messy, complex and multi-layered”, which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Deranty (2008), a French psychoanalyst specialising in pathologies relating to work and the workplace, would state that Karl’s situation is hardly abnormal: the nature and organisation of contemporary employment precludes co-operation and accentuates suffering. As Karl relates, the rules, regulations and technical procedures governing work processes resist the efforts of those who try to achieve productive ends. Dejours is pessimistic, claiming that lack of peer and self-approval can have a major pathological impact on one’s life. Informed by his observations as a psychological consultant, he observes within a range of work places a problematic sense of identity caused by the perception of an uncertain future, a deterioration of working conditions and people afraid of losing their jobs, afraid of not being able to achieve targets, afraid of not being able to adapt to constant changes and afraid of the competition from peers both inside and outside the organisation. The individual becomes paralysed by anxiety and suffers angst and disappointment. Without the recognition of an individual’s work, “the subject faces his or her own suffering, and it alone” (Deranty 2008, p. 37). Note that “recognition” is the crucial term. When Karl reflects on his practice by connecting theory to his observations, he discusses Senge’s (1990) ideas on shared vision:

A shared vision is a vision that many people are truly committed to because it reflects their own personal vision. If managed correctly, the whole [photocopier] installation problem could be solved simply by letting us as managers remove the obstacle that needs to be overcome. We would all then share the same vision which would be installations completed and satisfied customers.
When I interviewed Mags and asked her if the students’ reading was good for business, she told me that they said that they had not realised that the material was out there, and did not realise that taking time to think through what they were doing would have such an impact on their practice. The students had started to adopt far more reflective attitudes toward their everyday decision making and had begun to observe a “richness” of thinking and doing because of having reflected on tasks. She said that this new, fresh way of thinking was observable in a colleague who had been part of the course:

I see it in Emily. Whereas before she might have had a tendency to have a go at something, immediately when she started the course, she was coming back to me and telling me about her thinking and what has taken her there and how her thinking has given her a range of options. She might say that she has gone for this specific option but has realised the potential of the others as well. There is a richness to her thinking about even the smallest of things.

Ben pointed out how important it was to be upfront and honest with people even though there could be a bad reaction to the information “you needed to convey”. He used Burnes’ (2009) article on ethics and organisational change to make the point that no matter how difficult the day-to-day pressures to meet deadlines and performance targets were, it was important to act ethically at all times. The students’ recognition that not only what they were doing was valuable, but also that their frustrations, irritations, hunches, experiences and perceptions were reinforced by their reading was instrumental in their learning. This epistemic acknowledgement, to borrow Dejours’ formulation (Deranty 2008), is the only way work becomes a meaningful experience, strengthening one’s identity by engaging one’s intelligence.

Raelin (2007, p. 77) sees this recognition manifesting itself in “team-work sensivity”, “managing politics”, “handling pressure”: identity is crucial because “learning who one is, through the doing of work, is inevitable”. So how does reflecting on literature strengthen one’s identity? Hinchcliffe (2013, p. 53) makes the perfectly valid observation that identity—workplace or otherwise—as a concept—“runs into the sand the moment it is grasped”. There are many workplace identities. However, if, as he suggests, we concentrate on the “structural features” of workplace identity, we can make meaningful points. These structural features comprise values, intellect, performance and engagement, as suggested by his research project into what employers were looking for in graduates. As Hinchcliffe reminds us, the world of work is hardly a “value-free, technocratic domain” (p. 58). People need to demonstrate that they can be trusted: their personal ethics are transparent in their social dealings at work.

The research and reading the students undertook could be perceived as demanding in the context of full time employment. Work based learning students have to find time outside of work hours to read, research and write, but most find the research and reading extremely fulfilling because, sometimes for the first time, their own observations and ideas are substantiated in print by academics, practitioners and industry experts. As Emily observes:

Reading the different literature really opened my eyes to see different sides of things and to see how people think in different areas. Reading helps us to see a range of scenarios. In just
thinking differently and being open, you are able to reflect on new ways of thinking about things and [are thus able to have] more of a positive impact.

Shared values, as the students have brought up on more than one occasion, are central to a team. Reading and reflecting on Burnes’ article which advocates a return to the ethically based approach to change promoted originally by Kurt Lewin became a central and compelling feature in the students’ thinking and writing. Through reading Burnes’ article, the students learned that one of Lewin’s central preoccupations was the importance of democratic values and how to spread these values throughout society. Lewin had conducted research with seminal results into the effects of both autocratic and democratic atmospheres on people; and, in one of his studies on groups of children, he concluded that in an atmosphere in which children could make their own decisions democratically, they fought less and were friendlier towards each other. His pioneering work became the core of Organization Development, which looked at how organisations and individuals could function better. An important aspect of functioning within a democratic society and a democratic organisation was recognising and combating racism, discrimination and prejudice.

I asked students to examine their own backgrounds and to reflect on whether their interests and beliefs originated in their background. Although this chapter is concerned less with the exploration of more literary literature such as essays and novels (which I shall explain in depth in other chapters) and more with the academic literature I suggested the Toshiba students explore, Barbara used some of this more “literary” literature in her reflections on her practice. In particular she studied James Baldwin’s essay “Notes of a Native Son” (1955) (from Notes of a Native Son) in order to examine Baldwin’s style and use of voice. She comments on Baldwin’s passion, conviction and honesty and perceives the racism that blighted his life:

I felt longing for the writer, longing for him to be able to go back to the time when he realised his father had shared some kindnesses with him many years ago. But due to the self-loathing that his father had, this had prevented him from exuding any warmth or crumb of comfort to this family for so long that [hostility and unhappiness] had become a way of life to them all. He talks of the year he had contracted some dreadful, chronic disease of fever and fire in the bowels and at first I thought he was referring to the daily racism which he and everyone around him were subjected to – racism, which would be tantamount to a disease.

As Barbara’s narrative illustrates, the literary text can be interpreted in a socio-cultural way. She does not simply imagine the tensions of difference from Baldwin’s account, she faces the racial issues head-on. West (1996, p. 144) writes persuasively about the need for teachers to urge their students to engage with conflict. We need to use conflict as a “heuristic”, to try to get students to reflect on “how to live”, how to make meaning, how to recognise the “inexhaustibility of difference”. Baldwin’s powerful testimony of racism is far stronger than any kind of “recognising diversity” training course.

Similarly, Hinchcliffe’s structural features of intellect, performance and engagement can be broadened and enhanced by a wide engagement with literature. Through literature, students can reflect on and examine their social values—cultural and diversity awareness—values which were strongly endorsed by employers in
Hinchcliffe’s study. We see that looking at others’ stories helps us to reflect on our own values. But for students to tell their own stories, they need to find their own voices.

**Voice**

I have been running workshops on voice not only for Masters Degree students and Professional Doctoral candidates but also for new researchers at Middlesex University for the past two years. From a range of topics I examined—avoiding clichés, how to reinforce an argument, how to analyse texts, how to self-edit—I began to focus primarily on voice. I framed this topic by emphasising how each of us has a story to tell, a story that allows us to qualify and interpret what we observe and read. Students looked at how points of view are handled, how pieces of writing are organised, which metaphors and images writers employ and what evidence they use to support their conclusions. I will be discussing the work I do with individual Masters Degree and Doctoral candidates in detail in the final chapter. My interest in exploring voice and recognising its importance in helping students express themselves, however, emerged from my work with the Toshiba students. I was impressed by the students’ collective enthusiasm for and pride in their work, but I realised that if they were unable to develop strong, confident voices, they would not be able to articulate their stories.

Barnett (2004, p. 90) provides an illuminating discussion of voice that has informed my own perceptions. He points out that voice is much more than mere utterances but “a projection of the self”. As he expands his argument, he states that there are two voices—the embodied and the metaphorical. The former is the vocalising of our thoughts and feelings; the latter is the authentic placing of oneself in the world—what many academics call “positionality”. The embodied voice is the voice that is present or absent—it is when the student makes a classroom contribution, for example. The metaphorical voice may take some time to come into its own—it is when the student becomes “authentic” (p. 92). The embodied voice may not necessarily be authentic. If a student is simply echoing without reflection what she has read, the metaphorical or authentic voice is absent. Therefore, it is this metaphorical or authentic voice that we want to encourage. Barnett’s point is that the students who put themselves forward by expressing themselves, by overtly performing, may not be authentically communicating: there are many reasons the authentic voice may be suppressed. I will be drawing on what writers such as Barnett and others perceive as obstacles to thwarting the authentic voice and then detail how I addressed each obstacle in my work with the Toshiba students.

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I feel that I was taken on a journey, that there was a lot of trust and that you could pretty much study what you wanted to study. I realised I had a voice when people gave me feedback. It encouraged me to go forward and do more work and read more. We spoke extensively on
what we read. It opened a whole new world of writers and thinking I didn’t know existed and made me feel more confident.

This is Karl revealing how essential it is to feel safe enough to develop an authentic voice. Higher education can suppress voice. Elbow (2007) notes that students have been discouraged from including their own feelings and stories in academic discourse. To participate in anything, let alone in higher education, we need to speak in our own voice. Speaking in neutral tones—perhaps those occurring by emulating other more authoritative voices—does not allow students to use language inflected with their own identity. West (1996) argues that higher education discourages conflict, tension and dissensus: students are afraid to vent their true feelings because there is not enough reflective engagement with the tensions and differences in society. Barnett (2004, p. 95) reminds us that the simple instruction “tell me more” to students can neutralise their fears, make students bolder in amplifying their thoughts as well as invite them to “disclose their being”.

In my first Chertsey session with the Toshiba students, I could sense their anxiety. They did not know what to expect and were worried about what they had “got themselves into”. I have subsequently heard that statement, more or less phrased that way, from hundreds of students over the years. Higher education may suppress the voice and undergraduates may find themselves in a perpetual struggle with essay deadlines, referencing guidelines and a vast array of pedagogical novelties such as lecture note-taking, drafting literature reviews and developing the ability to write differently to meet different expectations. The Toshiba students and the other students I will be discussing had not had the luxury of acclimatising themselves into the higher education milieu. More often than not, they were forced to come to terms with referencing conventions, how to read with purpose and how to write clearly about their practice right from the outset. Making students feel safe is critical, and this feeling of safety can be engendered by the “tell me more” philosophy Barnett advocates. “Tell me more” invites an authentic voice which can then be harnessed to a story.

In order to block out the multiple voices students are subjected to in higher education, they must be encouraged to find out how they really feel and how others really feel. One of the first things I tell students regarding their reading and research is that not all writing is equal: there are many articles and books replete with obfuscatory, opaque and downright ambiguous language. I advise them to find something on the same subject by a different writer, a writer with more accessible prose. Students will quickly discover that a great deal of writing is from an objective stance, and, although some disciplines lend themselves to more informational and objective and less narrative and persuasive language, students learn to produce prose that has a voice and sounds like a person (Elbow 2007). Speigelman (2001) makes the perceptive point that we do not even note stories that have been woven seamlessly into the most successful arguments: the personal story helps the argument flow, and we are then persuaded by the writer.

The beauty of a work based learning curriculum is its flexibility and its propensity to extract relevant material form a range of disciplines. I encouraged the Toshiba students to read excerpts from Peter Senge’s *The Dance of Change*, (arguably from
a social science/business discipline). They read excerpts from John Dewey’s *How We Think* (sociology/philosophy), Kurt Lewin’s *A Dynamic Theory of Personality* (psychology) and they dipped into journals from social sciences, physical sciences and the arts and humanities. Students were especially impressed by the *Dance of Change* because of the story format. Speigelman’s (2001, p. 64) argument that stories can serve the same purposes as academic writing and that “narratives of personal experience can accomplish seriously scholarly work” appears prima facie as uncomfortably radical, but I do not think we can ever over-emphasise the power of personal insight. If we return to Barbara’s comments on Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son”, we can see Speigelman’s point illustrated clearly:

I thought [this essay] thought provoking and immensely powerful, written with passion and conviction. I found it sad and his honesty repulsed me at times. I felt longing for the writer to go back to a time when he realised that his father had shared some kindliness with him many years ago. I was frustrated that due to the self-loathing that he and his father had, there was no warmth or crumb of comfort in the family for so long that [bitterness] had become a way of life to them all.

Barbara has picked up on the poison of racism and the excoriating effect living as a second class citizen had for the narrator. She has responded to Baldwin’s unique voice, which is not confessional or therapeutic but instead is fashioned into an argument in which personal experience is used evidentially to illustrate a specific position. It did not take the Toshiba students long to recognise that the voice is the writer’s persona, the writer’s authority, the writer’s positionality. Danielwicz (2008, p. 420) states that, although it seems “counter-intuitive”, good writing should eschew public topics and focus on the “personal”. Her contention is that when students write impersonally, they have a difficult time making cognitive connections: the “I” should be at the centre of a student’s writing to develop their voice and authority. She enlarges her discussion by emphasising the political nature of voice: “a public voice results from the writer’s engagement and position in the world. Our texts are powerful only in relation to other readers and texts” (423). It is critical to bring to the workshop or seminar the at times unacknowledged fact that voice can be a catalyst for political debate. For work based learning students, and indeed many other students, academic writing can appear an amorphous mass of words on different subjects: teams, change, resources, productivity, profitability, values. When students begin to discern the political and power implications—the distinctive positions writers construct for themselves by using their voices authoritatively—students gain insight into how voice functions.

In an early discussion about “silo” mentality at Toshiba, James brought up the fact that there appeared to be some degree of envy directed at the students chosen to do the Middlesex University course.5 He said that the perception was that “all this learning stuff was a waste of time and that their jobs were about customer care—doing it, not learning about it”. The students discussed this and subsequently wrote

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5The expression “silo” originates from the late 1980s idea that a “silo” system is one incapable of reciprocal operations with other systems and suggests a rigid and controlling mind set.
about it, recognising that underlying this accusation was the fear and anxiety that power dynamics at the company were changing. Perhaps there was “something in this learning” that would privilege those involved and exclude others to the extent that those not involved in “all this learning stuff” would have their jobs threatened? Group psychology is beyond the purview of my discussion here, but I want to illustrate how emotive a subject learning or education is. There is a school of thought that promotes the idea that voice is antithetical to team working and that human development and learning is about community and “communities of learning” (Lave and Wenger 1991). Students recognised the value in team work, in mutual respect, in getting along. As Mags pointed out, the students continued to share their learning even after the course had finished:

You regularly see them now as the ones who encourage their colleagues and challenge their colleagues and introduce their colleagues to the skills set of the learning discipline that they gained from doing their study. You can see that this learning gets exponentially shared around and gets mirrored by their colleagues in terms of doing things.

I would argue that this “challenging” (in Mags’ words), in particular, comes from the students having developed their own voices. Before they even start their course, they recognise the influence a powerful voice can have. They have probably even been persuaded by an argument that had a compelling story interwoven within its text. They had encountered authoritative writing, yet they were most likely not part of these public narratives. Through examining powerful voices in literature and allowing their own emerging voices to result from these explorations, students gain in confidence and recognise that the personal is invariably political. Barbara saw that what she was learning had implications for her entire team:

It is important to have the authority to get on with it, to be trusted to come up with our own views where someone is not going to bang you down or chop you down in two seconds flat. That’s fantastic. [Reading Baldwin] made me think about my own staff. Am I cutting them short or not letting them flourish?

These activities such as reading, reflecting, soul-searching and transformation take a great deal of will. As Barnett (2004) demonstrates, learning is ideally a two-way relationship. It is important for a teacher to be inspiring, for example, in suggesting interesting literature to explore. Inspiring learning can be described. Ian attends to the difference between what he has perceived as “training” and what he has now experienced as inspirational learning:

The difference between corporate training and real education – what we have here – is that with corporate training, people come in, give you a massive folder of stuff and expect you to work through it. It doesn’t mean anything to me. Whereas with this University course, you get a few pages, read them in depth and then reflect on them. There’s more essence; there’s more to it than a training course.

Ian is describing the concept of “knowledge ownership”. The training company, presumably briefed by the organisation, imposes its ideas on what employees need in order to improve their practice. As Lewis (2013, p. 33) emphasises, because there is an assumption that workplace knowledge is the property of the employer, the
workers feel that their knowledge is valuable and “may resist attempts to appropriate the knowledge upon which they draw to perform work if they believe that sharing could devalue their unique work to the organization, making them more expendable”.

What more enlightened organisations have realised is that practitioners have the most knowledge about what they do. They are more than capable of finding creative solutions to problems. The challenge is, as Lewis sees it, is that most of this knowledge remains “inarticulate and latent” (p. 35).

A training company coming in with its own ideas about how to increase productivity or how to create real leadership potential and its “massive folder of stuff” is incapable of tapping into the knowledge and insights of the field practitioners—people who are doing the job every day. This is because the wealth of organisational knowledge, including tacit knowledge, resides in the insights of the employees.

When the employees are encouraged to articulate their knowledge, own their knowledge, and make their knowledge explicit, they are then able to make these insights available to the company for which they work. In Lewis’ words: “Ownership perceptions are the key to sharing” (p. 35). Ian suggests that favourable organisational contexts need to be created for that to happen: employee education rather than employee training is the way that an organisation can demonstrate it is relinquishing its desire to control knowledge and recognising instead that the knowledge of its people is where the real wealth resides.

Mags discusses the next step for the Toshiba students:

My view is now that what the students really need is to get themselves into a strategic project to look at the complete wider business because it is very silo-like as many businesses are.

So to me there is a piece of work around organisational design, being really quite radical by getting the guys to look at whether the design of an organisation is now fit for purpose. What they are all telling me is that the organisation design here has now outgrown what is appropriate and fit for the business, so to me that would be a good project: looking at an entire business as to whether it is fit for the future because I don’t believe that this business is. Something could be done by having their ideas and input.

Training providers are interested in grafting their own ideas and input onto employees’ current knowledge. Work based learning looks to best practice solutions within the students. Predicated on unearthing best practice solutions is pedagogical guidance or, as Barnett (2004, p. 117) would have it, “inspirational teaching”. For that group of wary students I encountered back at the beginning of 2011 in their Chertsey boardroom office, I had to think about how I could inspire them:

Inspirational teaching requires that the teacher be himself inspired in some way. There has to be a passing on of spirit or, rather, the teacher’s spirit comes to be taken up in the student. The taking-up is only partly metaphorical. The spirit evident in the teacher’s enthusiasm, finds an echo in the student. The echo is not the original sound, but a further rendition of it. However, the student then infuses this spirit with her spirit: she fans its flames. She warms it and is warmed by it. She may even glow with excitement, seeing her curricula and pedagogical experiences in a new way (Barnett 2004, p. 117).

Barnett admits that this description of “inspiring” could be rightly perceived as puzzling and elusive. It certainly eschews any rules, techniques or systems. Like Barnett, I don’t believe that there is a template that can be rigorously adhered to.
Within the spirit of work based learning—learning about how to “move around” the workplace and how to reach the limits of one’s “mastery, expertise or, indeed, phronêsis (practical wisdom)” is paramount (Gibbs 2011, p. 21). When I considered some of the materials suggested to me to use with the new Toshiba cohort—a workbook with tasks including engagement statements and SWOT and PEST analyses – I was uninspired. I needed to think of far more stimulating and creative ways to address the learning outcomes of the module. I have always been convinced of the need to articulate one’s thoughts and ideas as articulately as possible so I decided to concentrate on writing as a vehicle for the students to demonstrate their knowledge. Given that the written word is the dominant mode of communication in all university subjects and the Toshiba students, were, after all, on a university course, writing became my principal area of concern.

In an article examining market orientation demands in higher education, Molesworth et al. (2009, p. xvi) make the semantic point that students need to think of themselves as learners rather than people aiming to possess a degree. Possessing impoverishes the learning experience: “a desire to have reduces the individual’s experience to desire, for something external—a commodity. In doing so, self-knowledge and a satisfaction in one’s practice is disallowed”. I remain unconvinced that self-knowledge and a satisfaction in one’s own practice can be compromised or tarnished by the desire for a material acknowledgment. In my experience, graduation and the receiving of a certificate, diploma or degree are the objectives when the student studies hard. The will to succeed is motivated by the end-goal of graduation. I recognise that the authors are referring to traditional, in the main, young undergraduates and that our more mature practitioners will be naturally imbued with different concerns. I further recognise that the authors’ emphasis is on the pedagogical constraints wrought by marketisation in higher education. However, a student’s ability to enter into academic conversations is less inhibited by marketisation and more promoted by inspirational teaching—teaching that helps the student realise her own authentic self-creativity. What is required is “a continuing and patient effort to so configure the total pedagogical environment, such that students come into spaces of their own” (Barnett 2004, p. 125). I interpret Barnett’s exhortation by encouraging students to devour literature that will increase their self-knowledge.

As part of the learning outcomes for the course, the students had to write a development plan. Barbara wanted to investigate stress as a major contributory factor to absence in the workplace. She read thoroughly from research in occupational health as well as from a series in the Harvard Business Review on stress related problems within the workplace. From the outset of our sessions together, I encouraged the students to read widely and pointed out that the Harvard Business Review contained many articles by practitioners, a fact which at times made their reading more relevant and certainly more accessible. Many articles in the Review read like stories as well. I thought it was prudent to direct the students to more conversational articles because the voice of a more “academic” article could alter or even warp their own tentative voices before they even started. Nesi (2012, p. 61) suggests that students try to imitate without fully comprehending the impersonal and “densely informative texts” they are presented with. The results
are understandably badly digested, inchoate, even incomprehensible texts. She has found that even at post-graduate levels, students’ academic writing is deficient: “It seems sensible to assume that most students will be familiar with informal, interactive, implicit language features” (p. 61).

These are the language features most prevalent in conversation and fiction. Of course it is unavoidable that there are set texts and specific “densely informative texts” within certain disciplines. The work based learning curriculum has the freedom and flexibility to allow students to pursue “evidence” in the shape of academic work that can be more accessible like the articles in the *Harvard Business Review* and, of course, stories and fiction. Barbara wrote that she thought there were some managers at Toshiba who have “kept quiet” because they were too busy or because of their “inherent desire to be liked”: she reinforces her observation from her *Harvard Business Review* article which stated that if managers’ work groups still show suboptimal performance after the familiar tool kit of interventions, the manager should be replaced.

Barbara’s mordant point that certain staff are “allowed” to carry on working at a high level of poor performance leads into a narrative about how she then approached the HR Manager with her ideas about forming a well-being group to combat stress and to see what could be done about what she perceived as a “serious” issue that could be “systematically addressed”. When she read the Baldwin essay she was able to link the narrator’s feelings of “not being heard” in a Black ghetto in the United States in the 1950s to what was happening in some pockets of her organisation. She was able not only to draw parallels between Baldwin’s fictionalised study and what she perceived was happening to some employees, she used Baldwin’s powerful dissection of the anomie, apathy and simmering resentment in the ghetto to highlight potential problem areas within her company:

We have approximately 270 employees in our company. In our financial year we lost 1308 days to sickness absence. We have had untold disciplinary, grievance, capability and attendance management meetings resulting in 207 working days on performance management alone.

Barbara does not simply detail grievance after grievance duly reinforced with appropriate academic research. She is capable of coming up with potential solutions:

We do so many things right at our company and that’s why I’m here, but we need to get a handle on absences and stress.

She suggests sending out a staff survey to gauge feedback as well as giving details to all staff about healthy eating and organising a lunch-time exercise group. Barbara had the will to research this topic thoroughly. When a student embarks on a major personal project of her own, her “will” becomes a “constituent” of her own identity (Barnett 2004, p. 20). Barnett believes that a student’s will must be engaged in order for the student to be committed to her learning: “without the will, nothing will be learnt by the student and no claim will be made by that student that can bear any weight” (26). To my mind, the will to learn needs to be captured then in a receptacle the student can use with the least amount of frustration. Attridge’s (2004) claim that
literature need not apply only to the production of high or elite culture—that “literature” can be applied to a range of inventive literatures is a useful reminder here.

The Value of the Humanities

Robert Coles, the Pulitzer Prize winning child psychiatrist and Harvard professor of social sciences, introduced reading literature (novels, poetry, short stories) into the Harvard graduate curriculum in the fields of medicine, law, education and business. In an interview published in the *Journal of Education*, he explained the difference between how he taught literature at the Harvard graduate schools and how it has been conventionally taught (since the 1970s):

I don’t teach [literature] the way many English professors teach. They teach deconstructionism, which actually is a version of, a reductionist version of, of psychoanalysis, and stay clear of moral issues. They are really a parody of what some psychoanalysts are – just cleverness, which is a curse to the students. Some English teachers are into those French theorists who so often stand for nothing, who are basically nihilists. I’m appalled! Thank God, I still love to read for the stake of reading from stories – something that may connect with how I live my life. (Ryan and Jenkins 1997, p. 2).

Coles’ words capture what I am endeavouring to do within a work based learning curriculum—to introduce the humanities, the branch of learning concerning human culture, particularly fields that contain the study of “arts, letters and morals” (Belfiore and Upchurch 2013, p. 1)—to working practitioners who can use the study to address the challenges of their own working lives. I wanted to do this because my own background as an English teacher could enable me to introduce students to literary culture as well as enable them to use the textual power of well crafted literature to write clearly. When I was introduced to the syllabus intended for the Toshiba students I thought that too much of it was task-focused and seemed to concentrate on skills acquisition at the expense of effecting a real educative transformation, hence my turning to literature.

PEST and SWOT analyses, as useful as they are for providing a stimulus for discussion and an aperçu into an organisation’s performance, need to be aligned to a far more robust way of getting students to think about themselves, to attend to how others think and to be responsive to a world of possibilities. Arguably employers want their employees to think broadly and to be capable of reflection. Emphasising the point that a task-based work based learning curriculum could be perceived as narrow, Hinchcliffe (2013, p. 64) advocates harnessing “the humanities” (what he terms as the “traditional staple of liberal education programmes”) to expand the horizons of work based learning students. For example, when addressing the challenges of organisational change, he suggests what the enthusiasts of “learning through doing” could consider is having students read Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s *The Leopard*, which although set in 1860s Sicily and concerned with the political, social and amorous travails of a superannuated aristocrat, would be far
more “enjoyable” and “instructive” for students to read than any number of books detailing the theories of change management (p. 65).

Except for Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son”, the students were not introduced to any “literary” texts; however, using the articles I have already detailed made me audacious enough to integrate more literary reading, such as Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt*, novels from Richard Henry Dana, John Williams, Alan Sillitoe, Fred Gipson and excerpts from 18th, 19th and 20th century essayists with cohorts from Wembley Stadium, the Halifax and both Masters and Doctoral students (discussions in subsequent chapters). My thinking behind proposing this book *Improving Workplace Learning by Teaching Literature* originated in a remark made by a colleague when I was delivering a survey of 19th century American literature that included Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. He remarked pessimistically that he doubted that 50 years hence would see *Moby Dick* or indeed any of Melville’s oeuvre being included on any literature syllabus except perhaps in an abridged format. Moreover, he despaired for the future of the humanities in general—as tuition fees increased, returns for students studying the humanities would simply not be great enough to secure their survival.

Belfiore and Upchurch (2013, p. 35) have edited a series of essays that examine the state of the humanities. The authors detail the history of their specific disciplines in the Academy and offer debates on their “utility” in an atmosphere dictated by inescapable economic considerations. They trace two discourses relevant to the discussion on the decline of the humanities—the rhetoric of “doom and gloom” in which the humanities are increasingly marginalised within a university system that has adopted a “business-like approach” to its curricula and perceive the humanities as “useless”; those who promote the humanities as having “an important contribution to make to boosting the national economy, to social cohesion, to individual quality of life”.

The skills of rhetoric, of composing persuasive texts, of “deriving interpretative narratives” (Parker 2013, pp. 51–52) are enshrined in the humanities, and, in particular, the teaching of literature. In one of the essays “The Futility of the Humanities”, Michael Bérubé describes his experiences teaching “general education” in the humanities at Pennsylvania State University to students in engineering, law, nursing, kinesiology, making the observation that the more “remote” the students’ majors were from the humanities, the weaker their reading and writing skills tended to be:

> We will find that when student reading and writing is the measure of academic achievement, the disciplines that are founded on practices of reading and writing will suddenly appear central to the educational mission of the university (Bérubé 2013, p. 75).

**Phronēsis or Practical Wisdom**

As the subtitle of this book is *Towards Wisdom*, it may be useful to explain the connection between teaching literature and wisdom. Kemmis (2012: 148) points out that since the aim of professional education is to develop professional knowledge in...
a broad sense, we should be encouraging craft knowledge and personal knowledge, not only on an individual basis but also within a community of practice. He makes the intriguing observation that we should think of phronêsis as “professional practice plus”. We want good practitioners, we want wise practitioners, but phronêsis is not something that can be taught—it can be learned only by experience. For Kemmis the “plus” is the “something a bit more” than knowledge: it is desiring someone to act ethically. For example, on a day to day basis, practitioners have to find the best ways to deal with situations. A manager realises that he has to deal with a member of his team. He will have to determine a diagnosis to suit these particular circumstances—a close knit team, a member of which is negative and hyper-critical of others, customer considerations. Practice, skill and judgment are all called for in these circumstances. The good, sound judgement is the “plus”: my contention is the “plus” is immeasurably enhanced by the reading of literature.

Here is Karl exploring the challenges of dealing with a colleague on the team who is resistant to change:

I am questioning myself. Is there a need to change X? What would it achieve in the long run? After all, his work is excellent and it is just his negative attitude that is draining me and the rest of the team. For example, he is constantly complaining that the equipment we supply is not what he would have chosen. Even though X’s work is, as stated, excellent, I think that he needs to be more positive. If he did become more positive, the effect on the team as a whole would be better in terms of team spirit which can affect output, customer relations and morale in general. He is a respected member of my team, so I need to think about how to change his attitude.

Karl is faced with a difficult decision that necessitates his acting wisely. What happens is that Karl uses Burnes (2009) to reflect on how to deal with the team member whose negativity threatens the rest of the team and, by extension, the company. Karl explains that something is needed beyond a pragmatic approach: he knew he needed to address the negative team member’s emotions. He appealed to him, therefore, on an emotional level, stressing how badly affected the whole team had been by his unhelpful attitude, persuading him emotionally to take responsibility for his actions. The ethical literature Karl uses to inform his considered and wise approach must be highlighted.

Marker (2013, p. 11) reminds us that when organisational leaders make unwise decisions, “their organisations suffer, and so can society”. Wisdom is not rooted in any scientific knowledge—it is both a cultural and metaphysical concept, something Sternberg (2003, p. 152) defines as “the application of successful intelligence and creativity as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good.” Karl wants to act wisely and I would suggest that foremost in his mind is the long-term health and survival of his team, and, by extension, Toshiba as a company. He shrewdly discerns the problems negativity can produce even for a “respected member of a team” who continues to perform “excellent” work.

There is a growing body of scientific evidence that demonstrates that emotions not only affect our perceptions but “at the level of neurological circuitry”, they appear to be “deeply embedded in the machinery of thought” (Hall 2010, p. 65). Karl is not a neurologist—he has instead used years of accumulated experience and wisdom to
recognise the potential problems negative emotions can have on an individual and on those with whom the individual works. This practical wisdom or phronēsis emerges from Aristotelian philosophy, for, as Aristotle (2009, p. 115) observed: “the work of man is achieved only in accordance with practical wisdom as well as with moral virtue”. Kinsella and Pitman (2012, p. 4) translate Aristotle’s ancient concept of phronēsis for a modern readership who wish to see how it can be usefully employed in considering professional knowledge. They note that phronēsis implies reflection and examine what it might “look like” in professional practice.

Karl was able to embrace uncertainty and go beyond competence. He was taking a risk by directly confronting the negative employee and explaining the ethical implications of his behaviour. Because the processes of most professions are limited by outcome based needs, people can be dissuaded from using their own creative and wise initiatives to resolve problems: there is inevitable a manual, a set of guidelines, an HR directive which will demonstrate what you are supposed to do in the event of any situation. Karl’s and others’ work demonstrate emphatically the integration of sound knowledge enhanced by literature into one’s own experienced practice can result in deep meaning for our students. It is therefore important that we develop teaching practices in which not only the students’ wisdom is encouraged to flourish but the wisdom derived from literature frames the educational discourse.

In an essay that attempts to recover Aristotle’s concept for the professionals, Ellnett Jr (2012, p. 15) states that phronēsis need not be restricted to the “range and scope of professional judgments”. He asserts that “one can be a good professional and also be a good spouse, a good parent, a good promoter of world-class university rowing” but being a professional “is a very important part of living a good life” (14). Karl’s concerns about his negative colleague evince a keen sense of professional identity and, the ultimate marker of a professional, a resourceful and ever-present need to “respond to changing conditions, resources and problems” and to exercise practices that “absorb new knowledge and ways of working” (Edwards 2010, p. 5). Karl is able to integrate literature on change to amplify and enrich his (wise) observations:

For Lewin (1935) change was less about achieving a particular objective and more about individuals and groups learning about themselves. He claimed that in doing so, these individuals and groups would of their own volition be prepared to change their behaviour. I need to find a way of exposing X to his own negativity in order to start his learning process. A change in our working practices must come from the people above us. Burnes (2009) notes that an organisation’s ethics are embedded in its culture. Consequently, attempting to change the norms of behaviour in an organisation by adopting an ethical code, for example, is over optimistic. We, the everyday practitioners and managers can effect positive change by modifying our own behaviours.

When students engage with literature, their observations are deepened and their sense of social and professional bonds is heightened.

Russell (1996, p. 9) reflects: “Social cohesion is a necessity, and mankind has never succeeded in enforcing cohesion by merely rational arguments”. All of the Toshiba students’ concerns centred on social cohesion in the workplace. My contention is that the humanities not only foster independent intelligence and critical
thinking skills, they are also “the cultural bedrock of a democratic polity” (Small 2013, p.126) according to those who argue for their relevance, profitability and power. One of the most high profile, recent writers who equate the humanities with a healthy, functioning democracy is Martha Nussbaum (2010, p. 21):

If this trend [of marginalising the humanities] continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements.

Conclusion

Did the students completing the Certificate of Personal and Professional Development affect the culture of Toshiba in a positive way? Students certainly demonstrated that they could use literature to address work-related problems. After the course ended, I asked the students as a group if they wanted to continue with the University courses (if money was no object). Emily appeared to answer for the group as a whole:

Yes, definitely, because [this learning] gives people more confidence to tackle things they might not have had exposure to before. From what I’ve seen, we tackle situations better and in HR we are better about getting the right job role. We can now make an informed decision rather than just [giving] an opinion.

It is clear that work based learning at Toshiba has developed strong voices in the students. Moreover, they have learned to value their practical wisdom to make sound judgements in the absence of certainty. Being intellectually and morally sensitive to a situation as well as displaying courage, resilience and sound practical reasoning is what is valued highly by contemporary management. In my next chapter exploring the concept of leadership, the students at Wembley Stadium were expected to—and did—have these qualities as well as those at Toshiba. My role was to help them to articulate their experiences, wisdom and project plans through the use of literature.

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