Chapter VII
Parawork

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ABSTRACT

The term parawork describes spaces and activities that function alongside—yet also outside—of traditional workplaces. Parawork spaces are not regulated by the workplace, but they are available for work-related activities. In parawork environments, it can be desirable to overlap the personal, social, and professional. Participating with others in parawork activities may not "get work done," yet these interactions may facilitate professional identity formation, association with workplace and professional culture, and readiness to accomplish workplace tasks and professional goals. This chapter defines parawork, focusing on parawork enabled by online communication technologies. The author reviews literature that supports and informs understanding of online parawork. Through case study of one woman's participation in an e-mail discussion list for teacher interns, the practical realities and possibilities of online parawork are considered. The chapter closes with conclusions about conditions necessary for effective online parawork, as well as implications for future research.

INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, *The Atlantic Monthly* began running a column called *Word Fugitives*. In this column, and in her book by the same title, Barbara Wallraff identifies phenomena that are familiar to many people and yet have no corresponding name. Wallraff invites readers to propose new words to fill some of English's linguistic gaps, and she features some of the more creative and appropriate monikers in her column. I take up a similar task here—although in a style quite different from that achieved by Walraff. The nameless concept

I am interested in is this: the spaces outside of traditional workplaces where people meet with others, and the interplay of personal, social, and professional activities occurring within such spaces that can contribute to a person's ability to accomplish work-related tasks and professional goals. The term I have coined to label these spaces and activities is *parawork*.

As I discuss parawork in this chapter, my objectives are as follows: to explain the parawork concept, to emphasize distinctions between virtual workplaces and online parawork, and to identify through case study some potential benefits of

online parawork spaces and activities for workers and their employers. This chapter defines *parawork*, with a focus on parawork enabled by online communication technologies. I review literature pertaining to the parawork concept and then present a case study that illustrates how online parawork occurs through a private e-mail discussion list, Intern-Net. As I analyze e-mail and interview data from one subscriber, a teacher intern, I discuss how she uses the discussion list to construct her professional identity, to ready herself to accomplish workplace tasks and goals, and to improve her association with workplace and professional cultures. The chapter closes with conclusions about conditions necessary for effective online parawork.

DEFINING *PARAWORK*

The definition of *parawork* that I am constructing is built upon the etymology and uses of the prefix *para-*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term *para* is a form of an ancient Greek word meaning "alongside of, by, past, beyond." In contemporary English, the prefix is used to give the meaning "analogous or parallel to, but separate from or going beyond, what is denoted by the root word" ("'para-', prefix[1]," 2005). In a general sense, then, *parawork* refers to that which is analogous or parallel to, but also separate from or going beyond, work.

The term *parawork* can refer both to spaces and to activities. If we take *work* to denote a place (as in, "She takes the bus to work"), it becomes apparent how *parawork* can be a spatial referent. When *parawork* is used to indicate place, it describes environments that can facilitate activities related to a person's work, spaces functioning alongside—while also outside the bounds—of traditional workplaces. Parawork spaces are not owned or regulated by the workplace; often these spaces are otherwise associated with personal or social activities. Offline parawork sites include golf courses, restaurants and coffee shops, and planes, trains, and automobiles—places where people may (or may not) choose to engage with each other in work-related talk and activities. In parawork environments, people expect to blend personal, social, and professional roles, to go "beyond' or "alongside of" their work. The tasks they accomplish may be described as "work-related" or seen as somehow contributing to their professional lives, though these tasks are not regarded as precisely the same as the sorts of "work" that people take up at actual workplaces. In parawork spaces, people expect to juggle and perhaps even integrate multiple personal and professional roles. There is an understanding that it is acceptable, even desirable, to use parawork spaces for a combination of social and professional pursuits.

Parawork refers not only to spaces, but also to the intertwined professional, social, and personal activities that people engage in within parawork environments. Given the definition of *para-* that I employ here, these activities are not just ordinary instances of work. Rather, they have unique characteristics that situate them "alongside of" or even "beyond" what is traditionally regarded as work. Specifically, people who participate in parawork activities have opportunities to interact with others in ways that contribute both to their performance of professional tasks and to their ability to manage professional and personal roles. When parawork takes place, the most visible actions may seem distinct from what we tend to think of as work, but the accompanying conversations focus on topics related to work and may contribute significantly to individuals' accomplishment of professional tasks and development.

A brief example: For years I commuted to graduate classes, driving an hour each direction. There were times when my car was a parawork place, and times when it was not; times when parawork activity occurred there, and times when it did not. Parawork was most likely to happen when I carpooled with other graduate teaching assistants (TAs) in programs related to mine.

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