

Chapter XVI

Using Cyberspace to Promote Transformative Learning Experiences and Consequently Democracy in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will explain transformative learning and its value and application to corporate training practices by promoting critical reflection on one's "frames of reference." This critical reflection can help one to challenge cultural and social assumptions, potentially leading the person to more democratic ways of thinking and behaving in the workplace. Cyberspace offers a unique and potentially powerful place to employ transformative learning practices, and along with explaining transformative learning, this chapter will explore how cyberspace can be used for this kind of learning. This chapter will also posit that new cyberspace environments such as Wiki's and Second Life hold tremendous promise as transformative learning spaces because they invite small group collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

Sopensky and Modrey (1995) "claim[ed] that in addition to technical communication abilities, technical communicators need procedural or 'how-to' knowledge of how to interact socially within their organizations in order to improve the quality of their written products" (cited in Hovde, 2002, p. 62), but as the workplace becomes more diverse and as corporations stretch into different cultures, social interaction becomes more of a

challenge. The problem would be less severe if everybody in the work place felt secure and as if their voices mattered, especially in collaborative work groups.

Unfortunately, democracy does not rule in the typical Western workplace, a workplace usually organized in a hierarchy; rather, often the ideas of the most powerful dominate because in hierarchal organizations where individuals compete for the recognition that will provide them with more power and money, those with status silence those

without. Since people gain status by having their ideas gradually heard and accepted, new hires of the dominant culture may eventually attain a place of prestige, but those not of the dominant culture may never gain that place. When that happens, the corporation loses because valuable ideas and perspectives never get heard.

Hovde (2002) contended that technical communicators in this environment need to mount good, sound arguments in order to be heard, and Moore and Kreth (2005) posited that they need to practice political manipulation in order to survive and thrive. While good arguments could be made for each idea, the former assumes that everyone in the workplace can gain an audience, and the latter assumes that the workplace must be a competitive battlefield. However, no matter how sound one's argument, if nobody listens, the argument has no worth; thus, Hovde's idea may work for people in the dominant culture, but perhaps not for those who do not belong. Likewise, people of a non-empowered culture, race or gender would have a difficult time practicing political manipulation because they have no power at all. Besides, the more employees manipulate one another, the less desirable the workplace. Of these two ideas, Hovde's makes the only sense, but for her idea to work, the workplace must become democratic.

In a democratic environment, all voices have an equal opportunity to be heard. This environment lends itself to the practice of workplace rhetoric as Hovde (2002) apparently envisioned it. In order for this kind of environment to evolve in an organization, however, employees at all stations need to become more democratic minded, and that means that most will have to transform the way they see themselves and others in the workplace, especially those who are of a different race, culture or gender.

To effect these transformations, corporate training practices should include spaces where transformative learning can be fostered. Because of its unique characteristics and because so much collaboration occurs there now, cyberspace offers

untapped potential as a place for transformative learning. In this chapter, I will provide an outline of transformative learning and how cyberspace can be an excellent tool for transformative learning within small workgroups and how these smaller transformations can engender transformation in the workplace culture. I will also illustrate how transformative learning strategies could have been applied to two online groups in an effort to show how these strategies could be applied in corporate training practices. Finally, I will propose ideas for fostering transformative learning with wikis, blogs and virtual meeting software as well as with technologies that are on the horizon.

BACKGROUND

Workplace Culture

American workplace culture tends to reflect the European descended, phallogocentric hegemony of American society. While certainly true that white men in junior positions do not have a strong voice in the typical workplace, evidence that women, African and Hispanic Americans, and those from other cultures have even weaker voices certainly exists. For example, stories by Alina Rutten, Steven Jong, and Beth Lee in *Writing a Professional Life* (Savage & Sullivan, 2000) depict the struggles of two women and a Chinese-American as they negotiate the political terrain of three different organizations. Certainly, a young white man starting a new job would have to learn the political landscape just as these three people did, but arguably, the young white man would have enjoyed some status which two white women and a Chinese-American did not.

Writing groups in the workplace often structure themselves in a hierarchy that mirrors this hegemony (Ede & Lunsford, 1991). Studies show that these groups lack the kind of profound creativity that more democratic groups enjoy because members de-voiced due to their lack of status

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