

Chapter XX

The Virtual Classroom @ Work

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ABSTRACT

Before we can exploit new technologies to realize new ways of working, we must be able to imagine innovative possibilities for learning. Organizations seeking to improve the way they work and build knowledge reach for new learning paradigms. Possibilities emerge when exploring learning and working in virtual spaces from social learning perspectives, such as situated learning.. In this chapter, findings from a qualitative case study in a geographically dispersed organization are used as a springboard for exploring the challenges of introducing innovative e-learning initiatives. This chapter adds to our understanding of learning and working in virtual spaces by delving into: (1) workplace practices related to virtual learning and work that facilitate and frustrate new ways of learning; and (2) notions of online community, informal learning, and blended learning which offer promise for re-conceptualizing learning within virtual work spaces. Recommendations are provided to guide the creation of fresh teaching and learning practices.

INTRODUCTION

Salmon's (2000) vision of networked learners demanding "smaller chunks of relevant learning, backed up by connections and explorative opportunities with like-minded others" (p. 91) seems to fit with the needs of the workplace, regardless of how it is configured virtually or physically. Given the prevalence of non-standard work arrangements and our increasingly networked workforce, learners need to slip between informal and formal experiences as learning needs demand, opportunities emerge, and time and tools permit.

However, there seems to be a misalignment between what online communication technolo-

gies (OCT) can do in a learning context and what is actually happening. Merely adding OCTs to the organizational technology palette does not automatically foster new approaches. Organizations, worker-learners, and learning practitioners are still mapping expectations and outcomes for virtual learning initiatives. Before we can exploit new technologies or realize new ways of working, we must be able to imagine new possibilities for learning. As organizations seek improvements in the way they work, think, and build knowledge, they reach for new learning paradigms. We must therefore start by looking closely at what assumptions about teaching and learning are embedded within the practices of the workplace.

This chapter builds on a research study that questioned how teaching and learning paradigms influence the design and use of e-learning technologies in the workplace. The setting for this case study was a multi-national consulting firm regarded as innovative in the way it uses e-learning technologies to deliver training. Workers in Consulting Company (a pseudonym) are geographically dispersed, located in a mix of corporate office spaces, home offices, and client sites. Participating in virtual teams for work and learning is integral to the corporate culture. A change-oriented, competitive, and market-driven workplace, Consulting Company (CC) is an organization that defines people as knowledge assets and is dependent on innovative knowledge workers. Employees require a high degree of interpersonal and collaboration skills, technology literacy, and ability to acquire new knowledge and skills as *just-in-time* requirements dictate. The findings illustrate how the workplace context, an eclectic array of assumptions about learning, and technologies in use influence what happens in a virtual classroom.

By drawing attention to the challenges of introducing innovative e-learning initiatives, we add to our understanding of learning and working in virtual spaces as we explore: (1) workplace practices around virtual learning and work that facilitate and frustrate new ways of learning; and (2) the concepts of online community and blended learning which offer promise for re-conceptualizing learning within virtual work spaces. Recommendations are offered for creating innovative teaching and learning practices appropriate for virtual work and learning spaces.

BACKGROUND

New Perspectives of Learning

The parade of Web-based technologies that can be used to create new learning opportunities seems endless. However, we must question whether

newer learning paradigms are reflected in the design and delivery of these e-learning experiences or whether we are merely replicating the same teaching and learning practices of the last few centuries. Let us begin by examining two perspectives.

As Rising and Watson (1998) report, a common model of workplace learning is one in which “knowledge is imparted in the fashion of a download: instructors present information and learners are expected to absorb it” (p. 137). The prevailing assumption is that “learning is an individual process, has a beginning and an end, is best separated from the rest of our activities, and is the result of teaching” (Wenger, 1998, p. 3). Based on positivism and behaviorism, this *transmission model* depicts learning as a process of internalizing knowledge; what Freire (1971) refers to as the *banking* concept of education. Numerous research studies and stories from the workplace highlight the ineffectiveness of this learning model (i.e., Knowles, 1980; Brown & Duguid, 1991; Wells, 2000).

What would a new paradigm encompass? Bruner (1996) argues that learning is best when it is “participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative, and given to constructing meanings rather than receiving them” (p. 84). *Knowledge* as an entity is replaced with *knowing* as an action (Sfard, 1998). Increasingly, “our understanding of how ‘learning’ in the workplace is accomplished expands beyond notions of individual cognition and ‘self-direction’ to incorporate awareness of situated communities of practice, mentoring, and the role of social participation” (Bratton, Helms Mills, Pyrch, & Sawchuk, 2004, p. 2). This view of learning is based on social learning theory. Offering a way to envision how technology could shape more dynamic learning in virtual learning spaces and workplaces, situated learning and social constructionism offer two compelling socio-cultural learning perspectives.

Situated learning is the work of Lave and Wenger (1991). They state that learning, thinking, and knowing are found in the “*relations* among

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