

Chapter XLVI

Negotiating Virtual Identity in an Age of Globalization

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ABSTRACT

Virtual workplaces are no longer the province of young technophiles, and we must become more conscious of the particular challenges and issues those considered “nontraditional” face in this new environment. Continued globalization, fostered in part by computer-mediated communication, is bringing diverse populations together in virtual spaces; however, because we bring our culture with us when we move online, the default identity of the faceless virtual workplace becomes the young, white male. How do those considered nontraditional then negotiate their identity in order to contribute successfully? This chapter will explore this question with a case study of a Vietnam veteran in the workplace of a freshman writing classroom and, in doing so, will invite educators, employers, and researchers into discussions of virtual identity and interaction, how we perform ourselves in online workplaces, and fostering virtual communities.

NEGOTIATING VIRTUAL IDENTITY IN AN AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

We find ourselves working more and more in virtual spaces these days. Even so, while many of us are compelled, in both senses of the word (i.e., drawn to and forced), to work in this new environment, we expect those who work in these settings and share these spaces with us to perform and behave in the ways they regularly do in traditional workplace environments. We expect them to stay focused and on task. We expect them to communicate efficiently and effec-

tively with each other. We expect them to remain professional and courteous in their interactions with us. We expect them to cooperate in order to collaboratively produce innovative ideas and new products. This chapter defines virtual workplaces as any virtual space where two or more people come together to accomplish some sort of task. As virtual workplaces in this sense became more and more popular to work and exist within, many scholars argued that the disembodied, faceless nature of this environment promoted and fostered the above values more than traditional settings (Butler & Kinneavy, 1991; Cooper &

Selfe, 1990; Flores, 1990; Selfe, 1990). However, these technophilic, almost Utopian conceptions of online environments are being challenged by a number of researchers (Forman, 1994; Hawisher & Selfe, 1991; Janangelo, 1991; Matheson, 1991; Takayoshi, 1994).

What many of these studies are discovering is that we bring our culture with us when we move online, and the same issues of race, gender, and class that plague us in the “real” world also plague us in online environments. For example, we make certain assumptions about an other when all we see is a name on a screen, and the assumptions we make are fostered partly by the culture we live within. How many of us have made the assumption when working with a faceless name in a virtual workplace that the other person was white, male, and probably between the ages of 18-25, only to discover an identity very different when we finally meet that person face-to-face? More importantly, how does someone who is not white, male, and between the ages of 18-25 experience working in an environment where these assumptions are being made?

While the research challenging Utopian notions of virtual environments is doing so through the lenses of race, gender, and class, very few are examining the intersections of age and the online environment. Virtual workplaces are no longer the province of young technophiles, and we must become more conscious of the particular challenges and issues those considered “nontraditional,” who are drawn to or being forced to work in virtual workplaces, face in this new environment. Continued globalization fostered in part by computer-mediated communication is bringing diverse populations together in virtual spaces. The default identity of many online workplaces can be difficult for them, many of whom are over the age 30, to negotiate. When the default identity of the faceless virtual workplace is the young, white male, how do those considered nontraditional present themselves in order to contribute successfully in the ways we value in traditional workplace settings?

This chapter will explore this question with a case study of a Vietnam Veteran in the virtual workplace of an online freshman writing classroom. A 60-year-old Vietnam veteran began my fully online course as a student who had no desire to share personal details of his life in order to begin fostering an online community. As the course progressed, he began to bear witness to his wartime trauma and experiences as a paramedic after the war, significantly altering his relationship with other members of the class. An e-mail he wrote to me shortly after the course came to an end expressed his gratitude at being able to come to an acceptance of himself and his trauma, an acceptance, he argued, that would not have happened in a traditional classroom. By exploring the way this student presented himself in a virtual workplace dominated by young freshman just out of high school, this chapter will invite educators, employers, and researchers into discussions of virtual identity and interaction, how we perform ourselves in online workplaces, and fostering virtual communities.

We expect those who work in virtual workplaces to perform and behave in the ways they regularly do in traditional workplace environments. We expect them to remain focused and on task in order to collaboratively produce innovative ideas and new products. Many who are compelled to work in virtual spaces, especially for the very first time, experience the disembodied and faceless nature of the online environment in ways that work against these values. Some may feel isolated and utterly alone in an environment that does not allow face-to-face communication and subsequently do not participate. Some may perceive an absence of authority and act out in ways that disrupt an online community’s ability to function. Palloff and Pratt (1999) argue that making people conscious of the ways they contribute to building an online community is vitally important to offsetting the feelings of loneliness and alienation many of them will most likely experience. My first activity then is for students to post short introductions to each other, a seemingly risk-free task that begins to

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