Chapter 1
Social Change and Social Responsibility

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

This chapter discusses social change as context and social responsibility as impetus for a socio-culturally sensitive research and study of workplace e-learning. Current interventions of workplace e-learning, when not accompanied by socio-cultural sensitivity, are destined to falter with respect to adequate workplace adult education and training for a global, diverse workforce.

To describe transformation and change happening at work as ‘phenomena’ is an understatement. Workplace transformations and workforce changes are, quite literally, daily events. A dynamic and global workforce lives and works in the global age. Workers now participate in organizations comprising of people who are more experientially and demographically diverse. Consumer tastes and loyalties are incessantly transient. Organizations are also morphing with respect to technologies, processes, jobs, and accountabilities.

Against this backdrop, the growing reliance on workplace e-learning as a complete solution based on the goals of cost savings and process efficiencies is increasingly problematic. The assumption of the ubiquity of the technological or financial artefacts of hardware and software, as sufficient to overcome diverse workforce learning needs fundamentally naive.

The importance and necessity of broaching workplace e-learning as a socio-culturally negotiated idea, and not as just a technological or financial artefact, now becomes clearer. Social change does impact workplace transformations and workforce changes, which in turn directly influence workplace e-learning outcomes. Social responsibility now also becomes an ‘impetus’ for the socio-cultural sensitivity of workplace e-learning and the benefit of a global and diverse cohort of adult learners contending with workplace transformations, workforce changes, and social changes.

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BACKGROUND

Transformation and Change at Work

Workplace Transformations

Three transnational trends in particular stand out as characteristic of ‘the global age’ and key contributors to the massive, on-going, and wide-spread transformations of workplaces and changes in workforces: (a) globalization; (b) technological innovation; and, (c) the transition from national, industrial economies to a transnational, integrated, knowledge-based economy. What should not be inferred from this statement is that these three trends comprise the only influences behind the global age. Globalization, technological innovation, and the knowledge-based economy are, however, widely regarded as central and essential to the conceptualization of the global age (Fenwick, 2001; Illeris, 2003; International Monetary Fund Staff (IMF), 2002; Peter Jarvis, 2000; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001 (OECD), 2001). For the purposes of this chapter, ‘global age’ refers to the coming together of globalization, technological innovation, and the knowledge-based economy, where the key outcomes of this confluence are workplace transformation and workforce change (Remtulla, 2007).

What is meant by ‘globalization’ and what does the process of globalization do? The IMF (2002; 2008, May) stipulates that globalization refers to the increasing integration of economies around the world, particularly through trade and financial flows. Earlier views on globalization, however, such as those of Robertson (1992) and Amutabi et al. (1997), take a more composite stance. For them, globalization is a process which entails social, cultural, political, and environmental dimensions as well as an economic dimension. It is not limited to just trade and financial flows, but inculcates the migration of people, ideas, ways of life, and traditions across international borders.

This chapter also accepts a wider angle on the process of globalization for a global workforce in the global age. This breadth in meaning may serve to better inform socio-culturally sensitive research and study of workplace e-learning.

What about ‘technological innovation’? Castells (1996) makes the case that technological innovations in general were foundational for the vast economic-restructuring that took place in the 1980’s when the term globalization came into common use. Jarvis (2000) too agrees that the growth and integration of a world market and the flow of capital progressed quickly as a direct result of technology. Technological innovation enables the process of globalization which then effects nations socially, culturally, politically, environmentally, and economically.

To interpret the interaction of globalization and technological innovation as ‘one way’, however, is too reductive. To advocate that globalization drives technological innovation, or vice versa, is insufficient when studying workplace transformations. A more appropriate characterization of the relationship between the processes of globalization and technological innovation would be one that is reciprocal and symbiotic. Not only does technological innovation expedite globalization, but globalization also makes possible the transfer and movement of ideas, cultures, traditions, and people who foster technological innovation (Amutabi et al., 1997). Again, this chapter agrees to a more composite view of technological innovation. Here, ‘innovation’ includes not only the imaginative ‘process of invention’, but also the new products, business process, and/or services that are invented, and where ‘technological innovation’ is not restricted to just information and communication technologies (ICTs), but evokes technology in general (Remtulla, 2007).

What about ‘the knowledge economy’ or ‘the knowledge-based economy’? Both globalization and technological innovation play their part in the creation of the knowledge-based economy (‘knowledge economy’ and ‘knowledge-based
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