Chapter 4
Redressing Socio-Cultural Insensitivity

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

This chapter concerns many of the challenges facing socio-cultural researchers of workplace e-learning when attempting a social critique of workplace e-learning. These obstacles include finding a common ground to begin a socio-culturally based research and study of workplace e-learning as well as using an approach that authentically balances ‘distance’ and ‘education’ so that distance education does not become a ‘distant education’. The overwhelming emphasis on the technological artefacts of workplace e-learning are not having the expected impacts on workplace adult education and training to the degree so profoundly anticipated by so many.

The research and study of workplace e-learning as a socio-culturally negotiated ‘idea’ may be one such way. To do this, notions of social theory, taxonomy, and the researcher, as they relate to the field of adult education, and for a global workforce of adult learners, now become necessary. The complexity of approaching the diverse field of adult education with respect to social theory is explained, as are some of the challenges of applying the socio-cultural sensitivity taxonomy by using adult education as a backdrop for understanding workplace e-learning.

‘Socio-cultural Sensitivity Taxonomy for Workplace E-learning’ is presented and comprises four basic elements: (a) a context (social change) and an impetus (social responsibility) for a socio-culturally based research and study of workplace e-learning; (b) two outcomes (normalization and universalization) of technological artefactual approaches to workplace e-learning research and study; (c) two dominant cultural paradigms (commodified knowledges and innovative artefact) shaping workplace e-learning historicity in organizations; and, (d) four workplace
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e-learning scenarios (instrumental instruction, rational training, dehumanizing ideologies, and social integration), that all present socio-cultural impacts for the workforce from socio-culturally insensitive, technological artefactual approaches to workplace e-learning research and study.

Figure 1 and Figure 2, originally from the Preface, are re-presented here, more formally.

BACKGROUND

Need for Socio-Cultural Critique

The excitement around e-learning and its potential for education and training in the workplace, combined with technological artefactual approaches to workplace e-learning for workplace adult education and training, has resulted in three outcomes: (a) research that should be done, but isn’t; (b) research that is inconclusive; or, (c) research that is being done, but not reaching workplace adult education and training practitioners in the workplace (Salas et al., 2002a).

The implications of this circumstance are quite serious. The number of workers and the dollars amounts currently being planned for investment into workplace e-learning, and, the expected returns on these investments, either in monetary terms or improved worker and organizational performance, may never fully materialize. The reasons for this worrisome situation are now more well-known:

The problem is compounded because HR practitioners, especially those who have pressing organizational problems for which they need solutions, are not communicating with researchers...HR practitioners are spending billions of dollars annually to implement DL (distance learning) programs, even though researchers have not yet definitively identified which learners will benefit the most and under what conditions...(Salas et al., 2002a)

Newton et al. (2002) also cautions:

Thus, the widespread rhetoric of promises for more flexible access to training and the subsequent rapid adoption of these goals by governments...and industries have not been accompanied by an understanding of the factors that contribute to effective implementation of online learning...

Moving Away from the Technological Artefactual

Socio-cultural critiques challenge the tendency to view workplace e-learning as concrete ‘artefact’, and instead, actively adopt emergent, relational, socially constructed, and interpretive aspects of the mixed and fluid ‘idea’ of workplace e-learning. A critical and socio-cultural take on the idea of workplace e-learning moves beyond the dominant, highly structured paradigms where social reality is accepted as discrete and static; the world is seen...
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