Chapter 5
Infallibility of Innovative Artefacts

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

This chapter discusses the cultural paradigm of ‘innovative artefacts’ in the workplace. This cultural paradigm is one of two proposed paradigms that shape socio-culturally insensitive, technological artefactual approaches to workplace e-learning research and study. Subsequently, this paradigm also socially reshapes workplace e-learning historicity for workplace adult education and training, resulting in socio-cultural impacts on the workforce.

Technological innovation and business process change dominate workplace transformations. At the same time, any discussion on the socio-cultural impacts of workplace e-learning must also take into account that workplace e-learning is arguably both a technological innovation and as well as a business administration process, all of which affect adult learning in the workplace.

Critical theory problematizes these relations between technology and technological progress as well as workplace e-learning. The ‘presumption of neutrality’ is highlighted as it influences the shaping of workplace e-learning and its dubious, shifting, and reversible impacts on the workforce. A focused discourse analysis of the connotations and assumptions that have further shaped e-learning for the workplace over the past decade illustrate workplace e-learning’s changing emphases over the years, from administrational to associational to artefactual, today.

The technological artefacts of workplace e-learning now deserve closer scrutiny. The similarities and differences between ‘online learning and simulations’, ‘learning objects’, and ‘learning management systems’ are highlighted as each of these technological artefacts, more often than not, is taken as equivalent to and a substitute for learning. The ‘presumption of neutrality’ now also

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comes to fruition in the ‘infallibility paradox’ for workplace e-learning.

For workplace e-learning, adherence to the belief in the infallibility of innovative artefacts leads to two workplace e-learning scenarios: (a) instrumental instruction (see Chapter 7); and, (b) rational training (see Chapter 8).

BACKGROUND

Technological Innovation

For this chapter, ‘technological innovation’ is not restricted to manufacturing, but evokes technological invention and creativity more generally. Taken in a more composite light, ‘innovation’ may include any newly developed products, business processes, or services (Utterback, 1994). Such innovation may include advances in assembled goods; manufactured as well as intellectual products; cultural artefacts; corporate restructuring and change; as well as, industry renewal. As the focus of this book is on ‘idea’s’ as an alternative to the ‘artefactual’, technological innovation is also accepted as continuous, rhizomic, and ongoing practices that are not limited to distinct, discrete, materialized events that occur at singular points in time.

Leading up to the 21st Century

Technological innovation, as is documented almost on a daily basis through corporate websites, newspaper headlines, television programs, or industry conventions, all are a staple from the mid-to-late 20th century onwards. However, innovation in technology was not always the norm. The majority of the 20th century, according to Szabó & Négyesi (2005), may be described as an age of industrial capitalism; centred in manufacturing; beneficial primarily to the developed countries of the West and Europe; and, characterized by long periods of stability and certainty.

In this period, market structures remained rigid. The constancy of the market was made possible, first of all, from the stability of mass production in the manufacturing sector. This also resulted in fairly established product markets; price-consistency among select, dominant players; as well as, long-term employment relationships between organizations and their workers. Quite to the contrary of current experience, the underlying motive from the past that reinforced this sense of permanence was a lack of (the desire for) technological innovation.

A tradition of established business climates, consistent demand, and mass production, all contributed directly to low technological innovation and high rates of inflexibility between workers, customers, markets, and suppliers. In many industries, technological innovation was regarded as unnecessary and unwarranted. To preserve this intransigence, technological innovation was intentionally and consciously pursued at a much slower pace than today:

Inflexible mass production was characterized by a low innovation rate. A stable environment and low level of innovation conversely assume each other...If there is no innovation, by necessity material processes will dominate...Because of weak innovation, there are long product cycles, which make the appearance of routine processes possible. If the employees become more experienced in routine processes, costs will decline and profits will increase for the company. Because the key elements for raising the company’s profits are firm-specific routine processes, in order to boost their efficiency, the firms are content to support the increase in their employees’ firm-specific knowledge (Szabó & Négyesi, 2005).

Neither workers, nor customers, nor manufacturers pursued innovation with any great vigour, preferring steady prices, continued employment, predictable markets, and established products.
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