Chapter 17
Applying Dramaturgy to Virtual Work Research

Shawn D. Long
University of North Carolina – Charlotte, USA

Frances Walton
University of North Carolina – Charlotte, USA

Sayde J. Brais
University of North Carolina – Charlotte, USA

ABSTRACT

Dramaturgy as a research approach is a creative and useful tool to fully understand the complex dynamics of individuals interacting in a virtual work environment. Following Goffman's seminal dramaturgical research techniques, this chapter applies the principles and tenants of dramaturgy to virtual work. The authors examine the historical and theoretical underpinnings of dramaturgy and offer a potential research design integrating this methodological approach. The chapter extends the dramaturgical approach to offer challenges and opportunities of using this research approach in an electronic work domain.

INTRODUCTION

Dramaturgy is a sociological approach with roots in symbolic interactionism that accounts for social interactions in everyday life. Erving Goffman (1959) in his seminal book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* argues that human actions are dependent upon time, place and audience. Goffman offers a theatrical metaphor to capture this method in that individuals present themselves to others based on cultural values, norms, and expectations. Individuals are viewed as actors, the scene is viewed as the situation and the audience is the intended target for this performance. The ultimate goal of the presentation is acceptance from the audience through carefully conducted performance.

Dramaturgy, as a research tool, is an important methodological approach that allows researchers to better understand human performances in daily interactions, particularly in the workplace. As technology becomes more prevalent, accessible and sophisticated- many organizations are leveraging technological advances to facilitate the shift

from a face-to-face work environment to one that is increasingly remote. Work that was traditionally performed in a physical face-to-face environment can now be accomplished in a geographically dispersed digital environment. The time and space boundaries of the traditional workplace are being eradicated and replaced with less restrictive boundaries facilitated by technology.

This dramatic shift is reconstituting how we define and make sense of our work. A critical feature of the human condition is our ability to present, understand, display and interpret the communication and behavior of ourselves and others. Our expressions are our being. Goffman, a seminal scholar in dramaturgy, argued that all human interactions are very much like a grand play (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007). He eloquently posited that all human interactions and displays are performances that are acted out, observed, interpreted, and replayed between humans. The spirit of Goffman's scholarship was not solely concerned with the broad human experience, but also with the micro-level interactions between individuals that in its cumulative form embodies the lived human condition (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007). Human performances are identifiable in our constant physical interactions with others across a number of contexts. However, with the rapid explosion of information technology, particularly in the workplace, understanding, seeing, and interpreting virtual interactions as actual performances is not as easily transparent nor subject to this theatrical gaze that dramaturgy provides us.

This chapter centralizes the dramaturgical approach as a critical methodological tool for researchers to better understanding the experiences of organizational members in a virtual work environment. Long (2010) defined "virtual work" as a complex organizational phenomenon that is not easily defined, nor bounded to task-related considerations. He further explains that virtual work is a value-laden, politically rich, nuanced form of organizational functioning that has significant ecological considerations and implica-

tions. Moreover, virtual work is complicated by the constant attention to tasks, social concerns, informal and formal communication, emotional labor (as well as psychological and physical), impression management, face-saving techniques, surveillance, mentoring, decision-making, among other considerations. Long's (2010) definition of virtual work lays the methodological foundation to facilitate further exploration of virtual work from a dramaturgical perspective. Virtual work is primarily a performance bounded within the organizational context.

PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF DRAMATURGY

Humans are equipped with the ability to choose their actions (German, 2009; Goffman, 1959). Goffman finds that it is these interactions that can be read and understood through the lens of a staged play. At the core of these interactions are human agency and this agency leads scholars to consider everyday human interaction as comparable to a drama or performance (Burke, 1952; German, 2009; Goffman, 1959; Mitchell, 1978; Panteli & Duncan, 2004). The theoretical framework of dramaturgy centralizes the persuasive effect of selective staging of symbols and symbolic interaction (Manning, 1996). This framework is found across disciplines such as sociology, literary criticism, political science, rhetoric, organizational communication, philosophy, as well as interpersonal communication (German, 2009). Dramaturgy attempts to describe human interaction (Mitchell, 1978), while also acknowledging the world as "a symbolic creation of drama in which language is strategic and motivated by response to specific situations" (German, 2009, p. 1). Gardner (1992) envisions life as a drama wherein people carry out the role of actors on a stage. These staged dramas dictate how individuals, groups, and organizations carry out their behavior through acting, which

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