Chapter 2
Transformative Learning in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Using two silent-dialogue scenarios as a basis for discussion, this chapter provides an overview of how workplace learning can be framed by transformative learning theory. Based on the literature on workplace learning, the authors review the primary kinds of workplace learning that can be found in diverse workplace contexts. In contrast to the debates occurring in adult education about what is and what is not transformative learning, here they suggest that each kind of workplace learning has the potential to be a transformative learning experience. The chapter concludes with a discussion of paradoxes and implications. In this chapter the authors explore the nature of workplace learning from the perspective of transformative learning theory. In order to do this, they present two scenarios, one related to employer-sponsored learning in the workplace, and one related to leadership development facilitated by an external consultant. For each scenario, the authors use a silent dialogue—revealing the thoughts of the educator as the scenario unfolds, and the thoughts of one of the participants during the same timeframe. The silent dialogues reveal the conflicts and issues inherent in the scenarios. Drawing on the literature on workplace learning, the chapter provides an overview of kinds of workplace learning, and then analyzes the first scenario. This is followed by the presentation of the second scenario and an analysis of that scenario, next turning to transformative learning theory, and using that framework to better understand the kinds of workplace learning and how they can be transformative. The chapter discusses the paradoxes inherent in applying transformative learning theory to workplace learning and lists some implications for practice, theory development, and research.

FIRST SCENARIO: EMPLOYER-SPONSORED LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE (SILENT DIALOGUE)

Educator: It is with great anticipation that I have been planning a three-day workshop for faculty on how to use a new course management platform. I am excited about having this opportunity. I think I have covered everything, though it seems difficult to get all of the details of this platform thoroughly covered in just three days. I know that some of the participants will have little experience with online teaching and learning, while others tend to take every workshop we offer. I'll have to find the right balance between the two. I hope I am prepared for that.

Learner: Perhaps this workshop will actually be useful. It is bad enough that we are forced to take professional development workshops; it is worse when they waste my time which could be better spent planning lessons or grading papers. Since I teach online, I might as well go to the workshop. I'm not sure I'll learn anything new, but at least it won't tax my brain.

Educator: First day. The room is buzzing in the morning. We have a computer lab for the workshop, so everyone will be behind a computer and will be able to follow along, doing the same thing that I am projecting from my computer. Lots of people seem to know each other from prior workshops, but there seems to be about one-third of the group that do not know anyone (they sit quietly by themselves). There are twenty or twenty-five people in the room. I have a colleague to assist with helping people who need individual instruction. The "old pros" in the room start asking very technical questions, and I respond to some of these, but then I realize this may be intimidating for those who are unfamiliar with online teaching, so I hand out the agenda for the three days and quickly move into the first item, which is an overview of how software for an online course platform works.

Learner: My goodness, what a mix of people. Did they really have to put all these people who haven't got a clue in with those of us who know what we are doing? At least the teacher recognizes what is happening. It is interesting that she handed out the agenda just as all the questions started flying. I always like to keep my students guessing. The agenda really starts with the basics. I suppose I could read some papers while she goes through this section or I could help the guy with the blank look on his face sitting next to me. I have no idea who he is or any of the others for that matter. Introductions would have been nice. One of the good things about these workshops is talking to colleagues from other places. And, if the teacher had asked, she might have understood the mix she's got in her group.

Educator: After about half an hour, I ask everyone to login and go to the course site. To my astonishment, there are at least two people, maybe more, who don't seem to know how to do this. The old pros are already scanning through the course site and looking at the options and resources, but some are stuck on a blank screen or unsure of what to do next. I go to help one, and my assistant goes to help another. Others in the group start checking their e-mail and looking up unrelated things. I had not expected this. I ask one person if he can help another person get logged in, but he is reluctant to abandon his e-mail. Finally, we all get on the same page. But the timing of my agenda is now off. I'll have to speed up the next part, or perhaps shorten the morning break.

Learner: Login – really? – I've already gone through the course. I guess if I'm not going to learn anything new, I could at least help my seat mate. From the timing of the agenda,

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