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Vicki K. Carter

Sharon L. Howell  
*Pennsylvania State University*

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# **Circuit of Culture: A Critical Look at Dilbert and Workplace Learning**

Vicki K. Carter and Sharon L. Howell

Pennsylvania State University

**Abstract: As a cultural artifact, the Dilbert comic strip has generated both amusement and consternation, particularly for corporate trainers. This paper summarizes a year of research on Dilbert and its surrounding discourse in order to extend the critique of corporate education and Human Resource Development (HRD) into the cultural realm.**

*Captive Wage Slave. . . Work Fodder. . . Can You Feel the Love in this Place. . . Way-too-cynical. . . The TQM Nazis Won't Take Me Alive. . . Faceless Minion. . . This is your Brain at Training. . . Company Property (Dilbert Zone List of the Day entries; March, 1997 - November, 1997).*

## **Introduction**

These signature lines from postings to the Dilbert web site's List of the Day (LOTD) tell a succinct story about one group of white collar workers' feelings about work. The LOTD posts a daily question about work such as what did you learn at your last HRD class? Or, what is your favorite meeting topic? People contribute responses to the list and vote for their favorites. These entries, and the Dilbert collection of comic strips and other materials, have much to say to adult educators because they are related directly to HRD and learning at work.

Nadler and Nadler (1989) define Human Resource Development as learning experiences, specifically training, education, and development, organized and provided by employers during certain periods of time in order to encourage improvement of performance and/or personal growth of employees. Education in the workplace is typically paid for, constructed, and delivered under the auspices of an employer raising questions about learning for whom, for what purpose, and for whose benefit. Moreover, beliefs of trainers about power, practice, and the nature of work require constant examination because HRD has not explored in depth its own historical and socio-economic basis, nor the endemic conflict of priorities and values between employed and employer (Schied, 1995). Therein lies a profound contradiction for HRD practice and theory, for HRD does provide management significant measures of worker control in contradiction to, or concurrent with HRD's claims to be assisting in development of a productive and empowered workforce.

Research Overview

Cultural studies research was one of many lenses available to help understand and interpret issues of workplace learning. For this study, Dilbert served as an interpretative frame of reference and resource for taking the socio-attitudinal pulse in relation to learning at work. Space limitations necessitate a sketchy discussion of a much more complex research process. In this case, Dilbert was a cultural artifact that spoke directly to HRD practice. This study incorporated narrative and semiotic readings of the comic strip, books, and materials published by and about Dilbert's creator Scott Adams. Hermeneutic and interpellative analyses were used in order to uncover dimensions of belief structures and assumptions about learning at work. Comments posted by workers to the Dilbert web site were gathered for a ten-month period and were subsequently coded and thematically categorized. Workers who contributed comments to the web site were in jobs classified as knowledge or information work and most were male. Electronic interviews were conducted based on a purposeful sampling of web-site contributors who had written comments directly speaking to their experiences with training and development.

The study was based upon a critical approach to integrating academic knowledge into the lived context of work and workers. In the tradition of cultural studies research, several frameworks and methods were incorporated but were constantly undergirded by critical cultural studies theory (Agger, 1992). Specifically, the study was structured by the circuit of culture model (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay & Negus; 1997) and examined the major processes of representation, identity, regulation, consumption and production as means to articulate the distinct interconnections and convergences that form an artifact, object, or work of popular culture. These five linked components were used to organize the research findings and facilitate exploration of Dilbert in terms of "how it is represented, what social identities are associated with it, how it is produced and consumed, and what mechanisms regulate its distribution and use" (du Gay et al, 1997, p. 3).

### Production

Du Gay et al (1997) consider production not only in terms of how an artifact was created technically, but also how it was encoded with specific meanings during the process. It would appear that Dilbert's producers are pro-worker and anti-management and yet many executives view Dilbert as a tacit ally (Solomon, 1997). Although providing an extensive portrayal of serious workplace issues, Dilbert is superficial, never confronting fundamental workplace problems, or societal problems of any type, even for the white-collar (and white) technical professional it supposedly represents. The deeper inscriptions of cultural meanings stemming from an artifact such as Dilbert are easy to overlook. Dilbert's world is decontextualized with no basis for articulating social and cultural issues. The lack of context nullifies opportunities to explore gaps in social justice and equality. For example, one of its messages is that business is good and it pays the rent, therefore workers must take the bad along with it. Dilbertian humor does not ask questions about why work is like it is nor explicitly point out how a business practice is stupid. Instead, it promotes and reinforces existing hierarchies and power structures by legitimizing corporate ideology and integrating workers within established discourses and orders. These are some of the strong ideological components in the production of Dilbert.

## Regulation

Cultural artifacts are frequently regulated because certain groups or factions see them as inherently dangerous or damaging to their point of view. Dilbert cartoons have been banned from many workplaces because what some workers see as comic relief does not amuse their management (Dilbert, defender of the downsized, 1996). But Dilbert may also be read in support of the status quo (Kellner, 1990). Many CEOs believe Dilbert can act as a safe way to blow off disgruntled-worker steam (The anti-management guru, 1997). As a cultural text, Dilbert's regulatory messages act as a template for appropriate and desirable social relations. In doing so, the comic also provides justification for power and social inequities, presenting hierarchical structures as somehow naturally occurring and immutable. One reason Dilbert can be adapted for corporate benefit is due, in part, to late capitalism's assertion that workers are empowered and trusted by management. Knowledge work requires a transformation of obvious control to cultural control, the "culture" of work becoming like a technology within commitment (versus control) driven enterprises. Management practice is still highly regulatory, but within a context that values learning organizations, flexibility, risk-taking, and self-directed workers (Butler, 1997). The comic strip never interrogates corporate authority, nor the controlling nature of business. Through these regulatory processes, subjectivity is produced not simply by reflecting society, but also by actively creating and producing the model working subject required by capitalism in its current near-millennium state. Dilbert, as a cultural artifact, helps to inscribe workers through culture, discourse, and signifying systems (Giroux, 1992; Solomon, 1997).

## Consumption

According to study participants, workers find Dilbert hilariously funny in a painful kind of way. Zemke (1996), senior editor of *Training Magazine* and one of several HRD professionals expressing consternation about Dilbert, questioned why white collar workers were whining. Were employees ready to pass out from working in air-conditioned sweatshops? Could Dilbert truly be "a serious symbol of the downtrodden knowledge worker and are those the words of the prophet we see inscribed in the multitude of three-paneled theses that the wronged have nailed to the cubicle walls of the oppressors (p. 2)?" Other critiques suggest that it is really the corporate canon being deployed by Dilbert because the construction of subjectivity is wholly opposite the concept of voice. On the surface, the strip seems to allow individual expression, seen by management as resistance and workers as a semblance of power. But it is imaginary power, an image of power that is being manipulated. Real power belongs to those who can enforce their interpretation of what is going on in the workplace while keeping aggression and anger under control. Dilbert functions subtly to deflect genuine resistance to corporate control and can easily be seen as schizoid, representing "a cherished mascot of oppressed workers and a valued marketing tool for companies oppressing them" (Solomon, 1997, p. 10).

## Representation

Popular media, Dilbert included, are teaching machines creating meaning and aiding in the construction of knowledge (Giroux, 1992; Kellner, 1990). Dilbert products sell incredibly well because workers see strong connections to their own experience. HRD departments incorporate Dilbert into training plans. Videos and Dilbert-centered classes are popping up as opportunities to explore workplace problems and reinforce corporate values. Lockheed Martin, Xerox, and Honda all use Dilbert for training in ethics awareness, empowerment, and quality programs (Whitaker, 1997). Cohen/Gebler Associates, Inc. produces a Dilbert communications program with the objective of making sure the "message gets through to your target audience" (Cohen/Gebler web site, 1997). The many educational uses of Dilbert clearly contradict *Newsweek's* assessment that Dilbert is "the worst PR for corporate America since The Exxon Valdez" (Levy, 1996). With Dilbert inscribed as an educator, could he really be threatening a white collar overthrow of corporate America, when much of corporate America views Dilbert as a way to deflect cynicism, speak to work issues, and at the same time erode "inclinations to fight for better working conditions" (Solomon, 1997, p. 30)?

## Identity

Dilbert avoids tough identity issues that involve solidarity, humanity, dignity and justice. In relation to worker identity, Dilbert is an effective double-agent. Though the comic strip and other materials are classified as humor, and knowledge workers have adopted Dilbert as their champion, the fundamental messages in Dilbert are frightening. Dilbert characters consistently malign and denigrate their peers, effectively undermining a sense of strength and solidarity among workers. Dilbert materials are a huge indictment of workers who are portrayed as unwitting slackers. Adams refers to workers as mindless, irrational, easily-manipulated dolts. Humorous or not, this is a dangerous and debilitating message for workers who deal daily with management and training techniques designed subtly and overtly to help them internalize corporate values. Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) pointed out their growing concern with socio-technical practices designed to "facilitate productivity and commitment, sometimes in highly 'indoctrinating' ways" (p. 6). Contemporary work practices demand reconceptualization because workers are asked to invest more than their bodies. Fast-capitalism requires workers' hearts and minds, amounting "to a form of mind control and high-tech, but indirect coercion" (p. 7). However, this re-forming of identities may conflict with identities already established. As one LOTD contributor admitted: "Every day, in every way, I am internalizing corporate values."

## Implications for Adult Education

The complexities of analyzing a cultural artifact are obvious. This study of Dilbert found that the comic strip was often viewed by its readers as disconcertingly similar to their own day-to-day work lives. Fear of job loss and existing power relationships created a culture of adjustment in which workers felt the necessity to continually act in appropriate and sanctioned manners so as

not to disrupt the status quo. The study showed underlying misogyny, racial bigotry, classism, and elitism in both the strip and in data from web site commentaries. Dilbert materials and Dilbert readers had little understanding of, or concern for, inclusivity for marginalized and silenced voices. Not surprisingly, labor unions and the employees they represent have not jumped on the Dilbert band wagon. Workers' desire for inner comfort and predictability fit in with the rational side of fast-capitalism's corporate thinking. The role of HRD in this scenario was to teach solely to the needs of business, buttressing bureaucratic strangulation and reinforcing employment practices where workers not only have to have specific job knowledge and skills, but also have to present themselves as certain kinds of people. All of these things combined with continued economic decline for workers creates a betrayal of a wider vision of democracy and a democratic workplace.

Dilbert has much to say about education simply by virtue of the many instances words and concepts related to learning are found in Dilbert materials (Ohliger, 1996). A critical reading of Dilbert uncovers profoundly complex issues about the goals and consequences of workplace learning. Cultural artifacts provide social rules and explain behavior. In this sense, cultural artifacts are didactic. Big business training videos aside, Dilbert can be a powerful pedagogical tool. In spite of the lack of social awareness in Dilbert, it is possible to critically engage workplace issues, disrupting the deep structures and nuanced meanings found in the comic strip. This is where critical workplace learning comes into play. There are good things that come out of HRD; most training and development professionals do not have agendas intended to oppress or suppress the voices of workers. However, when workers such as the subjects in this study acknowledge they are internalizing corporate values that conflict with their own personal values, HRD becomes part of a problem that extends beyond work. Training supports institutional expectations that end up with workers who feign interest, communicate insincerely, and cope with dehumanizing management fads. These practices are conflated with record profits while re-engineering and downsizing run rampant. The combination perpetuates a pedagogy allied with reproducing a capitalist ideology and maintaining the status quo so that business and industry continues to maximize shareholder value (Butler, 1997; Gee et al, 1996). The goals of fast-capitalism are why popular media texts such as Dilbert demand serious reading and scrutiny because they become part of the workplace culture, a source of contestation and identity formation as well as laughter and fun. As HRD courses are taught, as Dilbert-based curricula take over some facets of workplace education, as critical educators continue to ask who benefits from training, education, and development at work, then the meanings produced by cultural texts such as Dilbert can help uncover which values and roles are legitimated and how work is defined.

Dilbert is being used to help create and sustain certain points of view. HRD has used Dilbert training materials even though its characters are apparent management dissidents. Although organizations may be transforming and/or restricting, liberatory and/or dominating, informed analyses are important for democratic educational practice. HRD, by failing to acknowledge and/or understand its complicity in deploying corporate rhetoric, and by leaving power under-theorized, cannot really uncover and integrate satisfactorily into its practice a contradictory situatedness between human agency and organizational dominance (Fiske, 1993). It is sobering to think of the comic - a "rocket fueled by worker bile" - as the model for white collar workers,

Dilbert the hero who helps them maintain their sanity (McNichol, 1995, p. 4), and Scott Adams as our nations "unofficial secretary of human resources" (Brown, 1997, p. 12).

## Summary

Fundamentally, Dilbert's message never probes the underlying motivations or assumptions behind corporate America's approach to workplace learning and workplace management. But important epistemological questions come from decoding the values associated with Dilbert. Kellner (1996) sums up the importance of this kind of research for critical adult educators when he discussed co-optation of even radical and subversive impulses which may also "serve as effective ways of absorbing individuals into the established society" (p. 10). A critical pedagogy that develops media literacy and politicizes culture allows educators and workers to pull apart messages encoded in the production process and examine their complexities, as business continues to operate beyond most people's power to effect it and control more and more of what workers think and do. Kellner asserted the importance of being "able to perceive the various ideological voices and codes in the artifacts of our common culture" (p. 11). This is where critical adult educators in workplace settings and workers themselves who hope for democratic spaces must become cultural critics and researchers.

A critical interrogation by workers and educators of the relationship among work, life, and learning would help to reframe training issues. Rather than a pedagogy of assimilation, a critical interpretation of this relationship invites possibilities for liberatory learning. Heaney (1995) expressed concern about training that aimed for control and benefited the corporation because it disenfranchised workers on the periphery. He described adult education at work as needing to be transformative and critically reflective, problematizing work experience and context in relation to a variety of other communities of practice. Workplace adult education focused on enhancing participation and voices of workers was one step toward this kind of learning, expanding "workers' otherwise narrow sphere of influence and concern" was the next (p. 150).

Cunningham (1993) described HRD as education that is framed by profit making concerns and education that does not question how work connects to the interests of society. In a system of unequal power, schools, including workplace learning, guarantee the reproduction of asymmetric power relationships and social injustice. The challenge for professional trainers will be to confront these issues instead of continuing to reproduce socially constructed inequities and celebrating the culture of the corporation. The goal will be to see knowledge production in a democratized form, engaging issues of power and exposing whose knowledge is really valued. The hope for democracy is the value of bringing a critical pedagogy to the workplace. A critical reading of Dilbert supports the hope that power inequities can be exposed, confronted and that possibilities still exist for corporations to accept responsibility for socially unacceptable actions.

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