

# Instructional Development: A Consideration of the Interpersonal Variables

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**Abstract.** It is only recently that much attention has been paid to the interpersonal aspects of the instructional development process. While many writers have stated that interpersonal competency is a must for instructional development specialists, few have spent much time explaining why. This paper utilizes behavioral and social-psychological frameworks to explain why the instructional development process can be a difficult and demotivating experience for a subject matter expert. Anecdotal evidence taken from interviews with three subject matter experts who were recently involved in instructional development projects is used to illustrate the difficulties that can occur. Also explored are the implications for research and for training instructional developers.

Since instructional development often consists of a collaboration between one or more instructional development specialists (IDs) and one or more subject matter experts (SMEs), it seems obvious that a significant amount of attention should be focused on the interpersonal aspects of the instructional development process. Recently there have been several articles published in the area (Bratton, 1979; Coscarelli & Stonewater, 1979; Durzo, 1979; Leitzman,

Walter, Earle & Myers, 1979; Rosenberg, 1978; Rutt, 1979). According to Bratton, who has reviewed the literature on this subject (1979) much of the writing falls in the categories of personal opinions and how-to-do-it approaches. Our review of the literature indicates that much has been done in terms of developing models and theories and in extending work in other areas (e.g., organization development, consultation skills) to the area of instructional development consultation. Research on consultation processes is needed and is one of the next logical steps in the development of the field; however, there is room for further study derived from the personal experiences of IDs and SMEs engaged in the instructional development process. Moreover, while most writers have pointed out the need for IDs to develop interpersonal competence, few have provided details about why they feel so strongly about the matter.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the instructional development process from the perspective of the SME. Our goal is to explain how the instructional development process can threaten and demotivate an SME and to discuss how interpersonal skills can be used to overcome these problems.

## The Hazards of Instructional Development

Most instructional developers would probably agree that instructional development is needed, that it is interesting, and that it can be fun and fulfilling. However, the average SME might experience the process as what has been called a social trap (Platt, 1973). A social trap occurs when socially desirable behaviors that would have a high long term payoff are punished in the short run. In such a case, the desirable behavior may be abandoned before the long run benefits occur. The same sort of social trap may exist in the instructional development process. That

is, while instructional development may be seen as a socially and educationally desirable goal, the short run experiences of SMEs may be such that they are tempted to abandon the process before a project is complete. For one thing, SMEs begin the instructional development process with a feeling that they have a fairly good grasp of their field and of how to teach it. As they progress through the instructional development process they enter into a period of disorganization and confusion. Among other things, they find that they can't explain the course concepts as well as they thought they could, that their teaching sequences no longer make sense, and that their exams are mostly at the memory level when they thought they were teaching people to think creatively.

It is only later, after a substantial and lengthy developmental effort, that SMEs are likely to feel that they are more in control of their course than they were initially. The comments made by one of three SMEs that we interviewed who were recently involved in development projects illustrate this point:

"I can't say that I feel that I am anywhere as strong in my field as I should be, but I do feel that I know two areas as well as anyone else...that I have...well...practical insights. So, it was quite disconcerting to me when we began to discuss some of my pet ideas. When he (the ID) began asking for examples, I provided some of the ones I've used in lectures and notes. But, somehow through the conversation and his questioning, I began to see that they didn't pan out and that some of the ideas weren't quite right. After a period of this, I began to wonder whether I knew anything at all."

During the development process, the ID can't help but send esteem-reducing messages to the SME. As an expert in the instructional field, the ID's task is to find problems with the instruction and correct them. The better the ID is, the more

problems are uncovered, and the more the analysis is esteem-reducing for the SME. As our interviewee put it:

"How did I feel? Frankly, I felt terrible. You see, I'm not your standard academic, but I did think that I made up for doing less research by being a better teacher and by focusing on practical applications. It felt awful to have what I considered my strengths washed away. I thought of quitting teaching several times during this period."

Another potentially negative aspect of the process has to do with the need for the SME to explain the content of the course to be developed to the ID. This places the SME in a vulnerable position rarely encountered elsewhere (except perhaps in the case of the academic SME

adequate."

A final factor that makes instructional development difficult for SMEs is the shift of control from the SME to the ID. Most SME's are accustomed to being in a position of unquestioned authority with respect to the selection of content and the delivery systems for their courses. The ID's ideas with respect to these matters challenge the SME's authority and force a sharing of power. One may wish to argue that this could not amount to much of a problem since the SME has agreed to engage in instructional development. However, the degree of power-sharing is likely to be far greater than an SME initially imagines it to be.

"She (the ID) had her own ideas about everything. I thought that I had a pretty good order of presentation,

"renowned masterful teacher" to "incompetent bore." Although the task analysis obviously demonstrated a need for improvement, he dropped his involvement with the project shortly after this first series of interviews.

A second SME we interviewed was designing a course for an open learning institution with the help of an ID from that institution. After several meetings he was quite upset and claimed to be near to quitting, although he didn't do so. His reasons as he stated them were the following:

"Each meeting with him (the ID) is like a debate. I'll mention an idea or a concept and he'll either question its integrity or he'll add several ideas of his own. In several meetings, I thought I'd never get a word in edgewise. I sometimes wonder who he thinks the expert is."

Experience in other related fields (e.g., organization development, counseling, and community development) suggests that there are several things an ID can do to minimize the negative aspects of the instructional development process and to ensure that a project reaches completion. Three areas that have been shown to be important will be discussed: the contracting process, methods of building supportive climates, and active listening techniques.

#### The Contracting Process

The contracting process has been stressed in other consultation fields (Caplan, 1970; Spencer, 1969) and recently in the field of instructional development (Leitzman et al., 1979). Ideally, a contract is a negotiated agreement about what will happen during the consultation process. However, this ideal is rarely reached or even consciously considered in most human transactions. Instead, much of what goes on is in the domain of what has been called an implicit psychological contract. In any meeting between two or more persons, there will be a set of expectations held by both parties about how each should behave. In some cases the expectations coincide, while in other they do not. Such contracts operate on a subconscious level, that is, neither party explicitly mentions behavioral expectations, yet each behaves as if under contract, expecting the other person to know the boundaries of the contract and not to transgress beyond them (Carney & McMahon, 1974; Egan, 1975). If a person senses a violation of these un-negotiated expectations, he or she will feel uncomfortable and may even avoid

## The instructional development process can threaten and demotivate an SME.

presenting papers to colleagues). Unlike the average student, the ID is typically an assertive learner who senses when things don't add up and is willing to say so. Unlike students, most IDs don't think there's something wrong with themselves when they don't understand the SME. Furthermore, the ID often has academic credentials that are near or above the level of the SME. Therefore, if the SME experiences difficulty in transmitting ideas, the standard defense of blaming the student for being unmotivated or unintelligent can't be used to explain away the difficulty. The responsibility for unclear concepts and disorganized presentations falls squarely on the SME's shoulders.

"It was usually interesting to work with him (the ID). It was almost like teaching the way it must have been done initially, as a tutorial, one or two students instead of large classes. But it was pretty frustrating when he didn't get the point. I would start thinking that it was just a matter of explaining things a little more, or that somehow he wasn't able to grasp what I was saying. But he was pretty persistent; in fact, I'd say that he didn't give any ground at all. Usually, I found that my explanations weren't

but she challenged it. It seemed that everything had to fit into her framework, which I'm not sure that I fully understood or believed in."

As others have pointed out, these psychological factors can reduce the SME's effectiveness during discussions and they can lead to a decision by the SME to terminate the developmental effort (Coscarelli & Stonewater, 1970; Davies, 1975). Consider, for example, the experiences of one of our interviewees who was a university professor who has taught at several leading academic institutions. He was initially attracted to instructional development by a colleague who was enthusiastically involved in the later stages of a development project. The professor felt that his students weren't responding to his teaching efforts as well as they might be. He started (and finished) the process with an intensive task analysis guided by a very experienced ID (the one who had worked with his colleague). After each day's discussion, he became extremely upset, had difficulty sleeping, and was sick to his stomach. Later, he explained to us that he had realized that much of what he had done over his many years of teaching didn't make sense. His self-concept had abruptly shifted from

future interactions with the other party. An example of an implicit psychological contract occurs at a social gathering where its generally okay to ask, "What do you do for a living?" but not, "How much money do you make?"

In the case of instructional development, this notion is very important because the SME is likely to have unrealistic expectations about the purposes and processes of instructional development, and unless these expectations are made explicit and are negotiated openly, the development effort may falter. For example, most IDs have probably experienced having to carefully explain that instructional development is not centered on learning to use media effectively. Other unrealistic expectations that the SME may hold include the following:

- That it will be easy to describe the objectives of the course.
- That the course concepts are easily explained to others.
- That the instructional development process will be fairly straightforward because the ID knows exactly what to do.
- That the ID is a sort of super organizer who will do much of the writing of exams, workbooks, etc.

Of course, most IDs anticipate some of these problems and try to account for them. For example, they usually explain that instructional development is not simply building media into a course. However, rarely will an ID lay out a explanation of the process and outcomes of instructional development to the degree that there is a full understanding on the part of the SME. That it is important to do so is stressed by Argyris (1970), a consultant in the field of organizational development. According to Argyris, it is only when clients can make a fully informed choice that their commitment to a developmental process will remain high.

For these reasons, IDs should be aware of the nature and importance of a psychological contract. In addition, they should know which aspects of an instructional development project need to be explicitly clarified and how to do so. While it is not the purpose of this paper to identify all the important elements of a contract or to describe at length how to communicate the contract to the SME, attention to the following elements should be considered:

- The length of the process.
- The frequency of meetings.
- The amount of stress the interaction

may cause, and the reasons for stress.

- The nature of the process (i.e., how the ID and SME will interact).
- The goals of the process (e.g., what instructional development is, what instructional objectives are, why are they important).
- The short run costs and the long run benefits of the process.

Communicating the above types of information to an SME can be accomplished in a variety of ways and using a variety of delivery techniques. There are excellent programmed workbooks explaining the purposes and techniques of instructional development (e.g., Dick and Carey, 1978). As food for thought, some counselors have developed videotapes of sessions that they show to new clients and others have developed precise, written contracts (Egan, 1975). In the instructional development context, Leitzman et al. (1975), provide several useful examples of contracts they have utilized with their clients. In initial discussions with new SME-clients, the authors have found it useful to spend about a half-hour describing one of their most recent development projects.

Of course, the ID should be careful not to overwhelm the SME with unnecessary detail. The point is that the relationship may be in jeopardy unless the SME's expectations are close to reality. Research is needed to determine

defensive climate is one in which a person perceives threat, becomes unable to concentrate, and distorts what he hears. Conversely, in supportive climates, people are better able to concentrate upon the content and cognitive meanings of messages. Because the nature of the interaction that takes place during instructional development is, in part, a transmission of complex information from SME to ID, clearly it would be important to develop a supportive climate.

There are two concepts mentioned by Gibb that are applicable to an instructional development interview, namely, control and evaluation. Controlling speech is speech in which someone is trying to do something to someone else—for example, to change an attitude, to influence behavior, or to restrict the field of activity. According to Gibb, speech that is used to control evokes resistance. This poses a difficulty for an ID because, as stated previously, part of the ID's job is to fit the SME's ideas into an instructional development framework.

This control dilemma can be resolved by the way in which the ID directs the conversation. Most IDs that the authors have observed use a series of (controlling) leading questions to elicit the information they need for the instructional development. This is analagous to the strategy that physicians use when ap-

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precisely which expectations are likely to mismatch reality and what is the most efficient method of bringing those expectations into line. One hypothesis of interest is that the relationship between the degree of detail in the contract and its effectiveness is curvilinear (Egan, 1975). Contracts either too high or too low in definition may result in low effectiveness.

#### **Building a Supportive Climate**

Gibb (1961) analyzed a large number of tape recordings in a variety of interpersonal situations and found that certain characteristics of the communications led either to the formation of defensive or supportive climates. A

proached by a patient. They typically ask patients a series of diagnostic questions and prescribe a solution. Patients often have little idea of where the questioning process is leading or they may even have the wrong idea. The physicians are often oblivious to the fact that the patient's hands are sweating because he fears that the physician questions indicate that something is dramatically wrong.

This type of approach may work in the doctor-patient relationship because of the nature of the psychological contract with respect to the practice of medicine. Many patients treat the physician as a parent figure and place

themselves in a submissive posture. However, the ID-SME relationship does not have this long historical pattern of dominance-submission, and because the ID and SME are often near equal status, it is not likely to. Still, many IDs proceed as if they are physicians producing a diagnosis for a patient.

There are two ways that ID's can reduce the degree of control they have over the process. First, they can do an effective job of contracting before the consultation starts in which case the SME will be more likely to understand and accept the ID's questioning. Second, during interviews, when the ID feels a need to draw information from the SME, questions can be preceded by a statement of purpose allowing the SME to share in the decision to pursue the subject further. As an example, the ID could say:

"I'd like to ask you about what you actually want the students to be able to do when they complete the course.

This will help us to write the course objectives. Is that okay?"

A second type of communication that leads to defensiveness is evaluative speech or "expressions which by tone of voice or verbal content seem to be judgmental" (Gibb, 1961). Avoiding evaluation completely is, of course, impossible since it is the ID's task to improve the instruction which necessitates evaluation. However, there are different ways that an ID can raise an identical issue:

1. "I'm confused about why you've included this item on your final exam. It's not clear to me how it relates to the objectives we've developed."

2. "I think you should scrap this item. It doesn't fit the objectives."

3. "Your exam items aren't consistent with the objectives."

4. "Why did you include this item on the final exams?"

The first statement would be better than the others for several reasons:

- It is problem-oriented rather than solution-focused as is statement #2.
- It is tentative rather than certain as are statements #2 and #3.
- It places the responsibility for the ID's lack of understanding on both parties rather than solely on the SME as do statements #2 and #3.
- It more completely describes the ID's thoughts about the issue, and thus orients the SME rather than merely probing as does statement #4.
- It refers to a specific item rather than generalizes about the exams as does

statement #3.

The methods of giving feedback in supportive ways cannot be completely demonstrated in this paper. However, there are numerous treatments about how to do so in the communications literature (Egan, 1975; Hanson, 1975; Kurtz & Jones, 1973; Morris & Sashkin, 1976; Porter, 1974). It is important to keep in mind that effectiveness in giving feedback is not an easily mastered skill. Thus training, and not just reading, may be a necessary adjunct of a training program for ID specialists.

very enthusiastic about what he was learning from me."

To summarize, the above discussion points out the sources of evaluation and the importance of the way evaluations are done in the instructional development process. While it may not be possible to avoid being evaluative, an ID can vary the way evaluation is delivered and certain variations are more likely to build a supportive climate than others. The cases also suggest that if the ID does not value the subject matter, he may be unable to develop a positive climate.

## In supportive climates, people are better able to concentrate upon the content and cognitive meanings of messages.

IDs should also be aware that they may transfer negative evaluations inadvertently. For example, one SME that we interviewed reported the following:

"I walked into the ID's office one day to say hello and I noticed a cartoon posted on her door. It was very negative about behavior modification (the SME's field). I didn't feel too bad at the time, but later I heard that she and the editor had told some other people that they think the course concepts are unrealistic. I would never trust them again after that."

A related issue has to do with the ID's use of positive evaluation. Many IDs focus their feedback on what's wrong with a course. While this is necessary, they could also focus on what's right. The ID's positive feedback may constitute the sole source of positive reinforcement during the initial period of the development process. In short, through selective positive reinforcement, the ID may be able to balance the short-run punishers that constitute the "social trap" of instructional development. An example of how powerful and ID can be in reinforcing an SME is demonstrated by the following statement made by one of the SMEs interview:

"He (the ID) was very interested in the content. It was great for me because most of my students never get into it in the way that he did. On some days he would describe how he had applied the ideas in his own work. At other times, he would be

### Active Listening

A third important area concerns the difficulty of transmitting accurate information from the SME to the ID. Haney (1979) has coined the term "bypassing" to refer to the many ways that messages can be misinterpreted when two or more people are conversing. According to Haney, bypassing occurs frequently because people tend to accept surface meanings as the true meaning of a message and thus fail to probe for deeper or alternative meanings.

Given that the task analysis involves the transmission of very complex ideas on the part of an expert (the SME) to a non-expert (the ID) and often involves the use of jargon, the likelihood that bypassing will occur during the process seems greater than in normal conversations.

Bypassing may have contributed to the ineffective practices described on the previous pages. In one case, the IDs may have judged the content to be unrealistic because they did not fully grasp it. In another, the ID may have debated the content as arduously as he did because he didn't understand it. While both problems could have been caused by an inadequate transmission of information from the SME to the IDs, they may also be caused by the failure of the IDs to attempt to clarify what they were hearing or by the tendency to believe that they understood when they hadn't. At least this is the feeling of one of our SMEs:

"He (the ID) would debate just about

everything. Sometimes, he would have a good point, but most often I was convinced that he didn't understand what I was talking about. A lot of the debate was about irrelevant or trivial aspects of the course ideas."

Haney (1979) recommends the following strategies for avoiding difficulties of this nature:

- Develop a tentativeness about one's understanding of a message (e.g., do not assume that you understand the SME's message).
- Ask for clarification or elaboration.
- Occasionally rephrase the other's ideas in your own words and check for verification.
- Ask for specific examples.

Active listening also serves as an immediate reinforcer to the SME and is consistent with counseling approaches that emphasize positive regard and empathy as key element in the relationship with the client (Rasmussen, 1978.) Along these lines, Savage (1975) designed and evaluated an experimental training system to improve the empathic capabilities of IDs when interviewing their SME clients. He concluded that the training system was useful for increasing the empathic identification of IDs toward clients and recommended that such training be incorporated into the curriculum for preparing new IDs. This type of training may have been helpful in the situation described earlier in which the SME became so upset that he was physically ill. Had the ID noticed that the SME was upset, he could have focused for a time on the SME's emotional reactions and perhaps helped to work them through.

## Summary and Recommendations

We have explained in some detail why the instructional development process is a "social trap" for the SME. We have also offered some thoughts about what can be done to make the process more reinforcing and less punishing in the short run. One obvious solution to these problems is to develop training in interpersonal competence as has been done by Savage (1975). While Savage's efforts are interesting and commendable, it seems certain that such training must go beyond training in empathic identification. Suggestions should be made about what constitutes the skills that are needed by IDs and about the hierarchical arrangements for teaching those skills. This paper was based on interviews with only three SMEs. There is a need for extensive surveys of SMEs

connected to both successful and unsuccessful projects and working with interpersonally skilled and unskilled IDs. It would be useful to have more work along the lines of that done by Price (1976) towards producing descriptive audits of the skills of successful and unsuccessful IDs. Having established the skills of successful practitioners, it would be worthwhile to determine how best to teach these skills to ID students and to determine whether such instruction produces the desired effect in the field.

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