Working with Subject Specialists: A Commentary on Morrison and Tessmer

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The papers by Morrison and Tessmer reflect the experiences of two instructional designers who work in quite different organizations. They have described a number of common observations and concerns as well as some unique ideas. Perhaps the idea that stands out most in the papers is the apparent contrast of roles of the designer vis-à-vis the subject specialist in various working situations. Consider the university situation described by Tessmer in which the designer serves as a consultant to the subject specialist. In this case, the subject specialist will use the instruction in his or her own classroom. Tessmer's paper offers a number of suggestions for handling this relationship. At the other extreme is the business and industry situation described by Morrison in which the roles often are completely reversed. The decision maker in this case is likely to be the designer and the consultant the subject specialist.

Morrison has made the interesting observation that there really is a continuum and not a dichotomy in this situation. He describes the situation in which one is creating instructor-led training in which there will be multiple sections and multiple instructors for a course. While both the subject specialist and the designer maintain their respective interests in the content and its delivery, it is not a clear either/or situation. They must both recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the instructors who will eventually deliver the instruction.

How important is this role reversal for the designer? At this point, it's not entirely clear. For example, both of the papers refer to problems, regardless of the setting, that the designer must anticipate in working with the subject specialist: the specialists want to teach everything, they rarely recognize a need for an instructional designer, they know what they want, and they are always busy. Morrison and Tessmer have directly or indirectly indicated that the problem is how to work effectively with a subject specialist, regardless of the setting in which the work is to be accomplished.

The primary solution proposed by Morrison and Tessmer is to train designers in interpersonal, group process, and communication skills. Morrison has been very specific in his recommendations for how the designer should be trained to handle the relationship. He suggests, for example, that the subject specialist should be made to feel good about the project and develop some sense of ownership, and that the designer should avoid instructional development jargon and be graceful in dealing with the "sacred cows" that are a part of every discipline.

The specificity of these suggestions will be helpful in terms of their use in classes that deal with this aspect of instructional design. A possible addition to the list of skills is the use of formative evaluation procedures as a method of arbitrating subject specialist-designer disagreements. For example, trying out prototype tests or sets of instructional materials with students can provide face-saving answers to many questions.

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The authors have highlighted another aspect of a successful relationship with a subject specialist. Designers must be confident that they have the instructional design skills that will be required to successfully carry out a project. This is not arrogance, but rather a perception of ability to succeed based upon successes in the past in similar situations. This seems to be the crux of the situation. How does the designer reach this state of quiet confidence in his or her ability to work with a subject specialist?

Most people who hire designers in industry or instructional support centers assume that both design and interpersonal skills have been taught in the academic training programs that prepare instructional designers. It's a fair assumption, and at least partially true. Students in instructional development programs vary in both their academic and interpersonal abilities. In nearly every program with which this author is familiar, the major emphasis in the curriculum is on the development of the technical design skills—you can't be a very good designer without them, no matter how good you are at other things.

How are interpersonal and communications skills taught? Mostly through trial and error in assistantships, internships, and initial jobs on campus. There is no question that most instructional designers practicing today first learned about the unique peculiarities of subject specialists by sitting across the table from one in a project meeting. This pseudo on-the-job training is certainly not all bad. A lot has been learned under these circumstances.

However, Tessmer has suggested that the training programs for design students should include the opportunity to observe interactions, to critique the interactions, to engage in role playing, and eventually to do something he calls "doing interactions in field situations." At Florida State, a course has been developed which includes many of these opportunities. The course, "Developing Instructor-Led Instruction," is offered to students who have already completed a basic instructional design course in which they produced and evaluated a unit of print-based instruction.

In this second design course, each student serves as both a designer and a subject specialist. Students identify a specialty area in which they would like to deliver a one-hour workshop, and other students in the course are assigned to work with them as the designers of the workshops. These assignments are made very early in the course so that each student is playing a dual role: as a designer of a workshop in a content area with which he or she is not familiar, and as a subject specialist who is having a workshop designed for him or her to deliver. The focus of the instruction in the course is on the skills needed by the designer to produce group-based, instructor-led instruction.

During the first offering of the course, the instructors paid relatively little attention to the quality of the relationships that were developing among the students as they played their two roles. The students were told to see the instructors if there were problems. Some did come, but very few. Each student was required to keep a log of meetings and to write a brief critique of the experience at the end of the course.

The reactions of the students to this dual role of designer in one situation and subject specialist in another were varied and often personally insightful. For example, one student recognized how his own submissive behavior as a designer had resulted in the domination of the project by the more assertive subject specialist. This student had a real insight into his own behavior and how it affected the outcome of the design of the instruction.

Some of the students' reactions were not positive. Several developed what might be considered hard-nosed attitudes about the situation. One stated that it was the responsibility of the designer to define the role of the subject specialist and that the specialist should not be consulted on development decisions that impact on instructional effectiveness.

Another student was even more adamant about the necessity of reaching an agreement about the roles of the people in the relationship. "If this had been a real situation, I would have refused to do the job until and unless the subject specialist agreed in writing to the amount and type of input that they would be providing, and that I could not be held responsible for the outcome if the amount and type of input was considered insufficient. I am not a mind reader!" One does not have to look between the lines to detect that this student felt he had been burned by the subject specialist who didn't deliver what was needed for the designer to do his job.

These student comments exemplify a major point in the course, and one that is made in the Morrison and Tessmer papers, namely the importance of each party in the relationship having an accurate perception of his or her role and of the expectations which will be made of them. In this regard, it is interesting that the views of the subject specialist are not represented in the Morrison and Tessmer papers. If they were, I'm sure they would also say, "Let's agree on what we are trying to accomplish, on what each of us will do, and when it will get done."

Perhaps this view is a little too simplistic, but it does seem possible to achieve this perspective if all parties understand their roles. In this regard, the brief forms described by Tessmer lay the groundwork between the de-

signer and the subject specialist by stating what instructional alternatives are available and how services will be provided. These documents are reviewed in private by the subject specialist and then discussed with the designer. The nature of the questions that the specialist must answer on the forms requires that agreement be reached on many aspects of the project, particularly that of the role of the subject specialist, before any work begins. While the forms themselves may not be appropriate in the context of business and industry, the concept and approach are. It may be predicted that, regardless of the setting, the greater the extent to which the subject specialist understands the total project and his or her role in it, the greater the probability that a successful relationship will exist between the specialist and the designer. An alternative result of this clarification process might be the termination of the relationship between the subject specialist and the designer. This may not necessarily be viewed as a negative outcome.

One more observation by a student in the Florida State course is worth noting. All the students' comments that have been referred to in this article were written from the point of view of the designer, but one student also chose to discuss his reaction to his role as the subject specialist-instructor for a workshop which was designed by another student. He states, "The use of instruction designed by another person reinforces the understanding of how various are the forms of human nature, even when they are following the same rules." No matter how well designers are trained, variety will continue to be the spice of life.