

Importance of Instructional Designers in Online Higher Education

Julia E. Hart

Columbia Southern University
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Abstract

When assigned to develop higher education courses for the online learning format, faculty members and instructional designers are often assigned to work together as a course development team. Sometimes, faculty members may be unaware of the field of instructional design and the valuable knowledge instructional designers can bring to a course development project. As a result, they may not realize that the advice and assistance instructional designers offer can help bring their courses to the next level. Instructional designers possess specific knowledge of learning theories and instructional design models that are the keys to improving the quality of instruction within online higher education courses. When such specialized knowledge is not utilized, the result can be low-level courses in which students are unsuccessful. Therefore, it is important for individuals within academia to begin to understand the key role instructional designers play in improving the quality of online higher education courses. Instructional designers often are responsible for helping faculty members write course objectives, create engaging assignments for the online format, and develop methods for presenting course information to learners. This presentation outlines research and information gathered from 12 research study participants that details the important role instructional designers play in course production and seeks to bring new knowledge about instructional design to the forefront of the field. Instructional designers are a valuable resource within higher education, and the expectation is that others within the field of academia will gain a clearer understanding about the need for instructional designers to be involved. Such an understanding can lead to a smoother course development process and a higher quality online course result. In addition to discussing the role of instructional designers in higher education, the 12 research study participants shared their strategies for successfully working with faculty members to develop high-quality courses within higher education.

Importance of Instructional Designers in Online Higher Education

When assigned to develop higher education courses for the online learning format, faculty members and instructional designers are often assigned to work together as a course development team. Sometimes, faculty members may be unaware of the field of instructional design and the valuable knowledge instructional designers can bring to a course development project. As a result, they may not realize that the advice and assistance instructional designers offer can help bring the faculty members' courses to the next level. Instructional designers possess specific knowledge of learning theories and instructional design models that are the keys to improving the quality of instruction within online higher education courses. When such specialized knowledge is not utilized, the result can be low-level courses in which students are unsuccessful. Therefore, it is important for individuals within academia to begin to understand the key role instructional designers play in improving the quality of online higher education courses.

This paper outlines research and information gathered from 12 research study participants that details the important role instructional designers play in course production and seeks to bring new knowledge about instructional design to the forefront of the field. Instructional designers are a valuable resource within higher education, and the expectation is that others within the field of academia will gain a clearer understanding about the need for instructional designers to be involved. Such an understanding can lead to a smoother course development process and a higher quality online course result. In addition to discussing the role of instructional designers in higher education, the 12 research study participants shared their strategies for successfully working with faculty members to develop high-quality courses within higher education.

Importance of Quality in Higher Education

Mykota (2013) stated that over the past few years there has been a large increase in the number of North American students enrolled in fully online education courses. The leadership teams within most higher education institutions now believe that their futures depend on their ability to provide quality online learning environments (Mykota, 2013). Allen and Seaman (2011, 2016), however, suggested that a large amount of lower quality courses being produced for the online format has begun to undermine the value of the educational opportunities afforded by the Internet. Therefore, it is important to ensure that each course produced is of the highest quality possible.

What exactly is considered a high-quality online course? A high-quality online course can be defined as a course in which students perform well, are motivated to learn, and remain engaged in their coursework (Cole, Shelley, & Swartz, 2014). Students must feel a sense of satisfaction and must believe that they have truly learned something valuable when they complete a course for the course to be considered high-quality (Cole, Shelley, & Swartz, 2014). Research has shown that a successful online course development project involves not only a faculty member but also an instructional designer who has knowledge of the pedagogy involved in designing a course for the online format (Brown, Eaton, Jacobsen, Roy, & Friesen, 2013; Outlaw, Rice, & Wright, 2017; Stevens, 2013).

Instructional Designers in Higher Education

While instructional designers may not know much about fire science or criminal justice, they are specially trained to take the expert content given to them by faculty members and transform it into learning experiences that will capture students' attention so that they can achieve the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in their chosen careers. Instructional designers perform many different duties when working with faculty members to design and develop courses. They take on many of the behind-the-scenes responsibilities within the course production that sometimes faculty members are unaware of so that they can focus on providing the expert content that students need to be successful. For example, instructional designers have been known to transcribe videos and audio files, develop various forms of media for courses, and even load courses into learning management systems.

However, there is much more to being an instructional designer than those types of activities suggest. Instructional designers today possess specific knowledge of learning theories and instructional design models that are the keys to improving the quality of online higher education courses (Shaw, 2012). They often are responsible for helping faculty SMEs write course objectives, create engaging assignments for the online format, and develop methods for presenting course information to learners (Hixon, 2008). Instructional designers are also often instrumental in helping higher education faculty negotiate and reduce the transactional distance that often occurs in online courses (Lunce & Huang, 2013). Transactional distance involves the misunderstanding and miscommunication that can occur between a learner and his or her professor due to the two parties being physically separated from one another (Lunce & Huang, 2013).

Brigance (2011) stated that higher education institutions offering online learning need individuals with a clear understanding of the direction and approach that needs to be taken to produce high-quality online courses and that instructional designers possess just that type of understanding. Instructional designers possess the following attributes that are necessary for bringing online courses to the highest levels:

- solid designer foundation in instructional and learning theories,
- an understanding of the cognitive process of learning,
- ability to utilize research to inform practice,
- competency in multimedia and online educational formats, and
- commitment to perpetual learning and readiness for challenges along the way (Brigance, 2011; Fyle, Moseley, & Hayes, 2012)

Instructional designers understand the need to keep up with a constantly changing field and the importance of working collaboratively with faculty members (Anderson, 2012; Brigance, 2011; Fyle et al., 2012). Some of the skills instructional designers possess that lend themselves well to improving the quality of online courses they help to produce include the following:

- possession of effective communication skills,
- knowledge of the need to constantly update instructional design skills,
- ability to apply current research and theory, and
- ability to identify and resolve ethical and legal issues (Anderson, 2012; Brigance, 2011; Fyle et al., 2012)

In a recently completed research study, 12 instructional designers who had worked within the field of online higher education for at least two years and had worked with faculty members to produce courses at least five times were interviewed. These instructional designers were asked if they believed that instructional designers were important within the field of higher education and, if so, how. Each of the participants agreed that instructional designers are important because they truly make a difference in the quality of the courses being produced for the online format. Instructional designers bring a specialized knowledge of instructional theories and how people learn to the table of online course design. Participants additionally stated that instructional designers help faculty members present course material in more engaging ways that can help students better absorb the subject matter. Instructional designers can also help faculty members keep the level of the students' knowledge about the subject matter in mind and can bring fresh eyes and new perspectives to course design that can help to improve how students experience online courses within higher education institutions. Several participants mentioned that faculty members often do not realize that the way a course is presented in a traditional classroom must change when it is transferred to an online format, and instructional designers bring a wealth of knowledge regarding such a change in pedagogy.

All but one of the participants touched on the fact that while faculty members are experts in their own fields of study, many do not have the background in education that instructional designers do. As a result, it can sometimes be difficult for faculty members to present their subject matter knowledge in ways that students can truly comprehend, especially in the online format, which can reduce the quality of the resulting course. One issue that a participant raised was that traditional faculty in higher education, while being trained specifically about their content, are often not trained as educators. Instructional designers can help faculty members translate their knowledge into a learning environment in which students can learn and achieve the outcomes of the course. In addition, the participant indicated that instructional designers are necessary to show the faculty different aspects of teaching and to help them deliver their content in ways that students can truly learn and understand, which is a hallmark of a high-quality online course.

Other participants described in more detail the specialized knowledge that instructional designers bring to an online course development project, which include the following:

Instructional designers are trained to specifically think about the student experience as they are working to develop online courses. They ensure that the subject matter is presented at the proper level so that students can absorb the material, especially if it is the first time they have ever encountered a topic.

Instructional designers can make sure that instructions for assignments are clearly written so that students understand what is being asked of them.

Instructional designers ensure that all the course material aligns with the course outcomes or objectives.

Instructional designers retain consistency in how courses are presented in their institutions because they know that students are more successful in a course in which they know where locate specific files or content that they need to complete their assignments.

Instructional designers bring a new perspective to the process of course design. They do not have an emotional or personal investment in a specific course development method and can look at course material with a different, more detailed, eye. Instructional designers are better able to see the issues that are keeping students from being successful in the course and can offer suggestions to faculty members that can help them improve their courses.

Strategies for Helping Others Realize the Importance of Instructional Designers

The outcomes of this study indicate that the development of a high-quality course for the online higher education format requires the expertise of more than one individual as well requiring the use of different types of teaching and learning strategies (Chao, Saj, & Hamilton, 2010; Vandenhouten, Gallager-Lepek, Reilly, & Berg, 2014). Faculty members bring an extensive knowledge of the subject matter covered in a course, and instructional designers bring specialized knowledge of how to present the subject matter in such a way that it helps students achieve the outcomes and goals of the course. To produce a high-quality course, these two individuals must be able to collaborate well with one another and form a cohesive team based on mutual respect for one another's time and expertise.

The instructional designers interviewed for this study indicated that many of the issues that they have with faculty members stem from the fact that faculty members are often not aware of what instructional designers do and what benefits they can bring to online course design and to the field of higher education in general. The belief of study participants and researchers alike is that more information needs to be disseminated regarding the significant

contributions and advancements that have been brought into the field of higher education through the work of instructional designers (Afsaneh, 2014).

The findings of this study also indicate that instructional designers and faculty members should make more of an effort to communicate with one another as communication appears to be the key to establishing a true course development partnership (Anderson, 2012; Ashbaugh, 2013; Campbell, Schwier, & Kenny, 2009). A successful partnership between a faculty member and an instructional designer can improve the quality of the resulting course and demonstrates how important an instructional designer can be within the field of higher education. Some strategies for improving the working relationship between instructional designers and faculty members include the following:

Establish an initial meeting between the two before the actual course design work begins (Tessmer, 1993). This gives both parties the opportunity to get to know one another, learn about each other's working styles and preferences, and hammer out issues regarding deadlines and methods for meeting the goals and outcomes of the course to hopefully avoid conflicts down the road.

Maintain regular communication between the instructional designer and the faculty member. Several participants mentioned that conflicts arise when faculty members and instructional designers lose touch with one another during a course development project or when deadlines are not met.

When offering feedback to faculty members, it is often better for an instructional designer to do so through a phone call or face-to-face so that the two parties have a chance to discuss the feedback together. This allows the instructional designer to explain more clearly why he or she thinks a change should be made, and it allows the faculty member the chance to give his or her opinion about the change. There are then no misunderstandings about the intent of the feedback, and each person has a chance to weigh in on the issue at hand, reducing the chance of conflict down the road.

Instructional designers should present themselves as helpers or as individuals who can complement the abilities of faculty members. By doing so, instructional designers are more likely to be seen as equal partners in course production, which can help to raise their credibility in the eyes of higher education faculty.

Instructional designers should make every effort to build a culture of teamwork with faculty members because it is teamwork and collaboration that will make the courses being produced the best they can be. Some ideas for creating a culture of teamwork include the following:

Instructional designers should clearly communicate their role and purpose in the course development process.

Instructional designers should put together a list of services that they can perform for faculty members and maybe even have a portfolio online where they can show faculty members examples of some of the work they have done and how this work improved the quality of the courses on which the instructional designers worked.

Instructional designers should listen to the ideas that faculty members have for their courses and advise them on how an instructional designer can help them achieve those ideas.

Instructional designers should have a thick skin and be prepared for faculty members not to accept the latest and greatest instructional technique that an instructional designer is suggesting. Instructional designers should be prepared to compromise with faculty members when necessary.

Instructional designers should have knowledge of their university's instructional design processes and have documentation in place so that they are always ready to answer any questions faculty members may have during course production.

Instructional designers should let faculty members know that they are there to guide the faculty members through the course development project, not dictate to them.

Above all, instructional designers and faculty members should together consider the needs of their students first and foremost and work together to ensure that all of the courses they develop are of the highest quality and provide a unique and fulfilling learning experience for all students.

Conclusion

High-quality online higher education courses are clearly the result of true collaboration and teamwork between faculty members and instructional designers, and more of an effort should be made by higher education leadership to promote this partnership in the future (Kotter, 2008; Kowch, 2009). Participants and researchers

believe that if more of an effort is made to clearly establish the roles and responsibilities of faculty members and instructional designers to course development projects, conflicts will diminish, and better courses will result which, in turn, will lead to a better outcome for students and more growth in the field of online higher education.

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