Are Instructional Design Graduates Ready for the Real World? A Panel Discussion

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Descriptors: Instructional Design, Graduate Studies

Introduction

Instructional design is an interdisciplinary field where many professionals come from a variety of academic and professional backgrounds. Instructional designers often are instrumental in workplace learning and higher education. While the job title and duties may vary from organization to organization, typically instructional designers create learning experiences for students, faculty, facilitators/trainers, customers, and employees based on organizational and learners needs. These learning experiences can be created for face-to-face, blended, or online learning formats. Instructional designers are often expected to be experts in curriculum development, learning theories, and learning technologies.

Formal instructional design programs have been around in the United States since the 1950s ranging from various program names including Information Technology and Curriculum Management (Gustafson, 2001). Despite these programs being around for more than 50 years, there is a lack of formal professional standards across the profession. In other words, a graduate from one instructional design program may be better versed in learning theories where another graduate from another program may be better versed in assessment. Furthermore, many instructional designers fell into the profession after being promoted from subject matter experts to instructional designer. Because of this, many accomplished instructional designers do not hold formal degrees in this field This is

one way that instructional designers differ from educators, who have legal provisions for licensure and education. This range of skills can be seen in various job descriptions for instructional designers. As a result, there are no uniformity in knowledge and skills required from position to position.

Due to the diversity of backgrounds of instructional designers, it can be challenging for these professionals to have a baseline knowledge of instructional design (Brown & Green, 2015). Furthermore, the golden standard of instructional design and what is and is not acceptable often varies depending on the organization that employs the instructional designer. One study found that over 70% of job announcement for instructional design positions require a bachelor's degree and 50% require 1 to 5 years of experience (Kang et al., 2015). An analysis by this paper's co-author found that 56% of the job postings analyzed required applicants to have a competency in specific software packages (North, 2019). Instructional designers must be comfortable working with people, designing instruction, developing or using tools for learning, and pulling and interpreting data for decision making.

Working in a profession that has been revolutionized by technology by delivering eLearning and virtual instruction, it is often difficult for instructional designers to keep up with the rapid pace of technological advancements (Reiser, 2017). Furthermore, with many instructional designers not having a formal professional development budget, often they are on their own to develop new skills and upskilling themselves (Cheong, Wettasighhe, & Murphy, 2006). To develop these skills, some instructional designers pursue higher education programs. According to West et al., institutions that offer programs to teach instructional designers are typically at the master's and Doctoral level (2017). Therefore, instructional designers seek programs that will help them to grow professionally. The programs available by institutions vary.

Programs designed to educate instructional designers should provide them with a basic knowledge of applicable theories and a portfolio of tools to release on the world. However, we know that places of business, including academia and industry, have explicit needs that they expect each prospective employee to have beyond theory. Industry expect their employees to have a working knowledge of current tools and be able to hit the ground running.

Purpose

The purpose of the panel discussion was to review the current needs of the instruction design realm from the perspective of graduate students, academic program leaders, and prospective industry employers. The remainder of the paper is a summary of the panel discussion and the insights from the panelists from the Association for Educational Communication and Technologies 2019 Inspired Conference held in Las Vegas, NV on October 24, 2019.

Participant Discussion

Question: Please introduce yourself and share you background with the audience.

Cara North: My name is Cara North and I'm a Senior Learning Experience Design at The Ohio State University. I am also a Ph.D. student in Educational Studies with an emphasis in Learning Technologies at The Ohio State University. I hold a BA in broadcast journalism from the University of Kentucky and an MA in workforce development from The Ohio State University.

Anna Leach: I am a Teaching Associate and 2nd year PhD student at the School of Information at the University of Arizona. I have a bachelor's degree in Mathematics from Seton Hill University and a Master of Learning Technologies degree from the Ohio State University.

Tracy Shroyer: I am a Learning Consultant in the financial services industry. Although I have been in the corporate world for over 23 years now, my experience working in a Learning & Development role has only spanned the last three years. I have also had the opportunity to hire and work closely with instructional designers as contractors for my team. I have a Masters in Business Administration, a Masters in Industrial-Organizational Psychology, and a PhD in Organization and Management, specializing in Leadership.

Ana-Paula Correia: I am an associate professor in learning technologies in the College of Education and Human Ecology at The Ohio State University. I am also the director of OSU's Center on Education and Training for Employment.

My research interests are related to distance education, online and mobile learning, collaborative learning and different approaches to instructional design education. At OSU I've founded the Learning and Experience Design

Research Group, a group dedicated to investigating learning design processes and pedagogies to create deep learning. I am an active contributor to the AECT, serving as President (2011-2013) for the Research and Theory Division and member of the editorial board for Educational Technology Research and Development (2015-2018).

Question: Describe your professional experience in instructional design.

Cara North: I've been working in the broad scope of learning and development for all of my professional career. After I graduated from the University of Kentucky, I moved back in with my parents because I couldn't find a job. I saw an ad in the local newspaper for guaranteed interviews at a telemarketing center in Huntington, WV. I went to the interview and walked out with a job. After working at the center for a few months, I was promoted to a call center quality assurance job. In this job, a small part of the duties was training call center employees about the call center policies and procedures. After my first training class, I knew I wanted to work in this capacity for my career. Throughout my career I have worked as an instructor led trainer, a curriculum developer, an LMS administrator, a training coordinator, and an instructional designer.

I've worked as an instructional designer at Amazon.com as well as The Ohio State University. While at Amazon.com, I made training materials for call and chat customer service representatives all around the world. My materials included standalone eLearning modules in our LMS, training guides and curriculum for customer service onboarding, and performance checklists for customer service managers rating their associates on various technical and soft skills. In my current role as a senior learning experience designer at The Ohio State University, I manage the LMS and courses for the College of Education and Human Ecology. Much more so than my corporate instructional design job, a good portion of my job is providing learning technology support to faculty, including how to use conference call platforms, apps on iPads, and general LMS how-to support. My skills and involvement with courses are optional, meaning the faculty member has to come to me for me to support their course.

Anna Leach: I too fell into training and instructional design quite by accident. While working as a data analyst at the Ohio State University, we went through a system change. The change required new database instances and understandings which meant training on the new system and new ways of reporting. Training on the new system and the database that housed the system was designed and facilitated by contractors. Eventually the contractors left and a few of us were left with picking up the training. We had no formal training experience. Our trainings were brief introductions to the data and opportunities to explore the data using different analytical tools. In some instances, it was easy but in many others it was difficult. Many people were frustrated with the tools or had trouble with the data. Fortunately, one of my colleagues was a former teacher. She exposed us to ideas and ways of instructing. From here, I explored instructional design.
I have always had an interest in continuing my education, so when the Master of Learning Technology program started at Ohio State University, I applied. After completing the program, I decided to continue on in my studies to a PhD program at the University of Arizona. I enjoy the research and study of educational technology. My focus of study is in the data produced by educational technology and how it is interpreted.

Tracy Shroyer: I have always wanted to get into a training-related role and have had opportunities here and there in roles within the organization I work over the years. In the fall of 2016, I was able to secure a Learning Consultant role within my organization and was over the moon with excitement. Since being in this role, I have had the opportunity to develop the learning strategy for a group of 260+ employees in my area of the business, to develop learning programs and curriculum. In doing this and working with a group of instructional designer contractors, I found a need at one point to jump in and learn how to use eLearning design software and develop about a dozen modules on my own to ensure our group achieved results. Recently, I introduced the concept of microlearning, and we are working on changing the method of learning in two content areas to leverage microlearning. We are now looking at the appropriate medium to deliver this learning.

Ana-Paula Correia: I have experience in K-12, academia, and industry as an instructional designer. Being a K-12 science teacher for several years before pursuing my graduate studies gave me a practical perspective of instructional design as a field of study. I have also worked as an instructional designer for a large pharmaceutical company for a couple of years. This experience allowed me to translate into practice what I have learned as a doctoral student in Instructional Systems Technology at Indiana University. I have been working as a college professor since 2005. My professional experience as both practitioner and academicist has provided me with insights that I apply every day on my practice.

Question: What knowledge or skills are employers looking for in instructional design graduates?

Cara North: I think it depends on the setting the student wants to work in. Having worked in both corporate and higher education settings, I will provide guidance for both.

Higher Education setting

Instructional design in higher education needs a disruption in my opinion. It should not be optional for courses to use an instructional designer, it should be mandatory. I've seen many travesties of online courses out there than make the student experience poor and frankly reflects poorly on the university at large. Given the current culture of instructional design in higher education I would say an instructional designer needs a significant depth of knowledge about learning technology tools. These tools include using conference call software, apps, and various programs and knowing how they look/function on multiple devices such as Windows, Mac OS, tablets, and mobile. While many may assume that information technology help desk may help with this, these questions in my experience come up way too often to higher education instructional designers. Furthermore, project management skills are critical to the success of a higher education instructional designer. I cannot tell you how many times I've been "ghosted" by a faculty member who wants help with a course and then disappears from email. Being able to determine if a project should keep going or should be taken off the load for the semester is critical. Furthermore, higher education instructional designers should have a good grasp of learning theories and research. Often faculty will challenge you on your design decisions and being able to back up perspectives with cognitive load research, behaviorist or constructivist perspectives, and even explain your design process is critical to getting their buy-in.

Corporate setting

A corporate instructional designer should be able to design a learning experience that is performance based. By creating a learning experience that is performance based, this can tell the organization exactly what the person taking the training will be able to do and apply at the end of the experience. Furthermore, knowing how to use various tools such as eLearning authoring tools and video editing is critical. There are two big eLearning authoring tools primarily used in the US market: Adobe Captivate and Articulate Storyline. I think it's necessary to be able to build a module in each of these tools as it is likely you will have access to one or the other at your job.

Knowledge and skills for both settings

If you are going to be in the profession of instructional design, it is critical that you are a lifelong learner. Throughout the eleven years of my career, I've seen so many changes including the way eLearning is created to alternative ways to collect user data. This is exciting and I try my best to keep up with what is going on in the profession. Additionally, the ability to keep the user in the middle of the design is critical. Your learning experience should be user-centric, and you won't know what they want if you don't ask them.

Anna Leach: Based on the literature that I have been exposed to, instructional designers are meant to wear many hats. They need to be able to collaborate and work well with people. They must be able to communicate well. They need to be able to work with many software packages and be able to keep up with or learn new tools regularly. They must also have a foundational knowledge in learning theory. But I would urge people to also start being comfortable working with data and focusing on data literacy. I do not believe that all instructional designers will have to create reports or pull numbers, but I think it is an asset to be able to demonstrate, numerically, their work. For example, in sales, a salesperson can show the number of sales from month to month to show success. In instructional design, what metrics do you have to be able to show your worth or show that the instruction that you designed is working. Simply collecting feedback from your users provides a data point that can be used and shared with others. Instructional designers almost always begin with a needs analysis before creating the training. Here you will have objectives. Follow up with the training implementation to see if those objectives are met. This is another data point that can demonstrate the value of the work.

Tracy Shroyer: I read a great article recently that talked about 10 skills that will allow learning and development professionals to get ahead in the industry (Spinelli, 2019). These skills include project management, change management, leadership, management development, data driven decision making and analysis, communication, strategic and critical thinking, marketing skills, relationship building, and teamwork and collaboration skills. In my experience hiring and working with instructional designers, having more experience in several of these skill areas would absolutely allow the individual to bring more value-add to the organization in which they are working or contracting. Instructional designers, as I would say with anyone in a focused role, need to take a step back and look at the bigger picture and skills needed in the business world to be more effective in being successful and achieving results.

Ana-Paula Correia: Employers want to see what new professionals can do with their academic degrees and certifications. Instructional design graduates need to be able to show what they can do with that knowledge and skills by creating a digital portfolio that showcases their skill set. One aspect of the master of Learning Technologies that our team at The Ohio State University is particularly proud of is the Practicum experience. In every course, students create learning artifacts that are included in a portfolio that is developed as part of the Practicum. However, the biggest strength of the Practicum experience is to work with a real-world client, identify an instructional problem and address that problem with a tangible solution. The Practicum is a structured online experience carefully guided and supervised by the student's advisor. It includes five distinctive milestones, as, establishing a memorandum of understanding and regular progress reports to the advisor and client.

Question: What recommendations or solutions would you like to share to help improve instructional design education?

Cara North: I feel there needs to be more practitioners involved in instructional design education. Not everyone who is seeking an instructional design degree wants to be a researcher. Researchers will not be able to help instructional design students often build interactions. In order to keep up with the rapid pace of change, instructional design programs should partner with practitioners or local Association for Talent and Development chapters to help build the technical acumen of the instructional design students.

Anna Leach: Project-based learning. Instructional Design programs need to offer opportunities to implement and apply knowledge. These opportunities held to build portfolios. Portfolios are critical for demonstrating work. Also, exposure to instructional design tools. A student should have a safe-space to work on a project in the current and known tools of the trade; things like Adobe Captivate, Articulate Storyline, etc. I would also like more multimodal projects; working with video, audio, and the like. If the program has requirements that the graduate leaves with a foundational knowledge of learning theory as well as practical experience managing projects and working with relevant tools, the program will produce a valuable and skilled employee.

Tracy Shroyer: I absolutely agree with what Cara notes about integrating more practitioners into instructional design education. This needs to occur more in every field, in my opinion. Practitioners provide the reality of putting the theory into practice and day-in and day-out successes and challenges of the role. As I mentioned before about the skills learning professionals should find ways in which to grow, I highly recommend the Association for Talent and Development (ATD) chapters as a place in which to learn and grow. Being part of the national and local chapter of ATD this past year has provided me with the opportunity to enhance my technical knowledge of learning tools, and to expand my professional network. I have also learned the importance of having a portfolio through my work in hiring instructional designers. Some people interview well, and this enables my company to get real-world examples of what they have done and learn more about how they went about the process of designing something as well. A portfolio also provides instructional designers with the opportunity to showcase their skills beyond the technical design aspect, such as project management and collaboration.

Ana-Paula Correia: Instructional design education, and education in general needs to evolve into rich and authentic learning experiences. For example, internships, employment during college, volunteering, and extra-curricular activities provide opportunities for people to showcase how they apply their knowledge and skills, make decisions, and create solutions in real working situations.

The purpose of these learning experiences is for students to have opportunities to engage in real-work experiences in a variety of formal and informal settings and strengthen their professional portfolio. They may consist of: (1) participating in the development of an educational product through various activities (e.g., conducting a needs assessment, reviewing various prototypes, assisting with the design); (2) assisting with design and development of training modules; or (3) assisting leadership on making learning technology-related decisions.

Question: What is the future of instructional design education?

Cara North: I would like to see instructional design to an apprenticeship model. In order to become an instructional designer, you should go through a project start to finish. There are so many elements of a project to manage and things that can't necessarily be taught including how not to break the heart of a subject matter expert who insists all of their content needs to be translated into eLearning.

Anna Leach: I worry that the future will be the same as it is now because the programs aren't changing rapidly enough. My experience from looking at the literature is that the programs focus on theory and not enough practical application. I am hopeful that institutions will start working within and outside of their own institutions to create projects for students to work on that are meaningful.

I also think that a divide in instructional design is coming. A divide from those that work with the technology and those that design. I worry about this direction. From experience in corporate settings, when functional and technical are not in communication, gaps are created. If a divide in the field starts, like it has with titles like learning engineer versus instructional technologist versus instructional designer, what will happen to the instruction? Will one half focus on tools use and implementation while the other focuses on learning theory?

Tracy Shroyer: I am unsure of what the future of instructional design education looks like, but I know there is a desperate need to do more than just feed design theory and the technical skills to students. Students should graduate from an instructional design program being more well-rounded to enter into the field and take off running and adding significant value to organizations.

Ana-Paula Correia: One approach for instructional design education that was proposed by one of my former doctoral students, Farrah D. Yusop, and I is called the Civic-Minded Instructional Designer (CMID) framework (Yusop & Correia (2012). This framework asserts a paradigm that any instructional work has social implications.

As a result, an instructional designer is viewed as a potential agent of social change who has the transformative power to bring about good to the society at large. The term "civic-minded instructional designer" is proposed, referring to an instructional design professional who: (a) has the public interest and a sense of civic responsibility at the forefront of his/her work, (b) is attentive, responsible, and responsive to the emergent instructional needs of the members of the community, and (c) utilizes his/her knowledge and skills in instructional design and technology to improve learning and performances of others. This framework may be an avenue to inform the future of instructional design education.

Question: What is one piece of advice you would give someone entering into the Instructional Design field?

Cara North: Network. Network. Network. You need a community of people to help lift you up and keep you on target for your professional development

Anna Leach: Data literacy. Explore ways of collecting and analyzing data from your ed tech tools.

Tracy Shroyer: Continually work to build and expand your skill set (beyond the technical design realm) and build your professional network.

Ana-Paula Correia: Be knowledgeable. Be able to explain the rationale for your design decisions and the strategies you use to overcome the design constraints. Use a rationale rooted both in theory and practice.
Keep studying. Stay curious.

Summary

The panel discussion highlights the breadth and depth of employment in the instructional design field. Recent graduates of instructional design programs find themselves ready for entry-level positions, but our panelists encourage programs to help future enrollees. They share that those in the instructional design programs will need to prove they can do project management, collaborate, communicate well, use relevant software, and more. There is a high demand for instructional designers to be eager life-long learners.

Future Studies

The participants would like to further explore the current needs of instructional design with respect to what employers are looking for as well as what institutions, in the United States and internationally, offer in their instructional design programs. We are interested in understanding the many titles of instructional design job postings. We are interested in studying job posting requirements. We would like to converse with others in

instructional design at different institutions of higher education as well as corporate environments. We also want to study the difference in front line worker training instructional designers versus corporate mandated training instructional designers.

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