Perspectives from Instructional Design Professionals Experienced in Corporate, Higher Education, and K-12 Industries

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Descriptors: Instructional Design and Career Path

The field of instructional design dates to the 1940s and World World II, with the pressing need to educate military personnel at high quality (Reiser, 2001). The industry is rooted in models, methodologies, and frameworks that have been designed to help facilitate positive learning experiences. When building a learning experience, instructional designers are typically involved in tasks like conducting a needs assessment, writing learning objectives, identifying relevant content, designing/developing instructional materials, coordinating with the team, and much more (Aschaiek, 2021). With the abrupt shift online resulting from the COVID-19 Pandemic, instructors had to figure out how to teach students digitally (Pilbeam, 2020), and instructional design became even more relevant. Instructional design emerged as an essential function requiring innovative thinking and foundational learning principles and became recognized by more people as a critical component of quality (Pilbeam, 2020).

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) states that "employment of training and development specialists is projected to grow 11 percent from 2020 to 2030, faster than the average for all occupations” (p. 1). Given the importance of this position, it is crucial to hire individuals with the proper credentials, like a degree in instructional design, educational design, learning design, or educational technology (Aschaiek, 2021).

There are instructional design functions and positions in different industries, e.g. higher education, corporate, and K-12. Foundational instructional design practices apply across contexts, including considering learner characteristics, background knowledge, and motivation; alignment between learning outcomes, instructional content, and assessments; and understanding how to use technology to enable and support learning. Instructional designers help to bridge the gap between learning and technology; create an engaging educational experience; and are an integral part of the learning process, no matter what sector they serve (Klein, 2014).
At the same time, unique areas specific to each sector will also impact differences in things like roles, titles, salaries, schedules, job prevalence, technologies used, required skill sets, reporting lines, job autonomy, flexibility, and the role of subject-matter experts. Here we explore three key educational sectors--higher education, corporate, and K12--in terms of the unique ways instructional design work gets done in each context.

Instructional Design in Higher Education

In contrast to skills-based training programs, higher education tends to take a more holistic approach to learning, positioning itself as educating the whole student rather than providing (only) discrete skill acquisition. There are challenges to this traditional model, such as competency-based programs, but most instructional design in higher education institutions remains vested in a holistic framework (Andriotis, 2017). The main drive for educational institutions is to build knowledge banks in various disciplines rather than learning specific skills (Lynch, 2020).

In this context, instructional designers work predominantly in support of or collaborating with subject matter experts to develop curricular and cocurricular learning experiences. Here we will focus on the curricular experiences wherein the subject matter experts are the academic faculty members. In some cases, the instructional designers may also be in faculty roles, though typically in professional/non-tenure track lines. There are two broad categorizations for the type of work an instructional designer, also sometimes called a learning designer, works with academic faculty and their courses: the “concierge” or the consultant model (Quinn, 2020; Vieger, 2020).

In the concierge model (Vieger, 2020), an instructional (or learning) designer and faculty member work closely to design and develop a course for an online or blended offering. The process is highly collaborative, and it is common for the instructional designer and faculty members to work together for an entire semester or more. The instructional designer often has project management responsibilities and either build the course themselves in the university-supported learning management system or coordinates with others who do. This is a very hands-on approach and involves a sense of co-ownership, where the designer and the faculty member view the course as “theirs.”

In the second model, the consultant model, the designer is positioned in a less hands-on manner and acts as a consultant to the faculty. Rather than being assigned to work very intensively on a few courses or a program and with a few faculty members, the designer might instead support all faculty in an entire department, college, or campus. In this role, the instructional designer is available to offer advice and solutions to faculty members regarding their online and hybrid courses, but ultimately, the course is solely in the domain of the faculty member (Quinn, 2020). There is not the same sense of shared ownership over the course and the amount of time the designer dedicates to individual course design is much less as their work is spread more broadly.
In both the concierge and consultant role, it is not uncommon for the designer to also take on a fair amount of informal faculty development. Given that most academic faculty receive little to no formal education or training into pedagogy, learning theory, or course design, it is common for the designer to inform the faculty member about best practices in online or hybrid course design and teaching as well as what is known about how learning best takes place given constant advances in the learning sciences and our understanding of “how people learn.”

The key technology instructional designers in higher education will use is the learning management system. Specific examples include Canvas, BlackBoard, and Moodle. Instructional designers also need to understand how multimedia can support and enable online learning, but will typically work with multimedia consultants rather than producing that media themselves. Salaries will largely depend on standards within the university itself and can vary across institutions.

In addition to staying professionally competent and being abreast of the latest developments in educational technology and innovative pedagogical approaches, much of the work of instructional designers in higher education comes down to relationship management. They will always need to successfully navigate the relationship between themselves and the faculty members with whom they work. Working with an instructional designer is a new experience for many faculty members. They are not always, at least initially, comfortable with having someone not in their field give input on how they should teach or design their course. It is essential that the instructional designer has strong communication and relationship-building skills and be confident in their expertise, an expertise that is typically distinct from the faculty member’s discipline-specific expertise. Ultimately, the instructional designer's job in higher education is to create the best learning experiences for the students they ultimately serve.

Instructional Design in Corporate Sectors

Corporate learning aims to ensure that every employee has the knowledge and expertise to handle any specific operation that will allow an organization to carry on its operations. In other words, the focus is on building competencies (Lynch, 2020). Competencies are the capabilities, knowledge, skills, and resources that constitute its defining strength. Furthermore, corporate organizations focus on training, and there may be requirements, but often, learning happens through curiosity and a library of courses. Training prepares the learner for something new and helps them to learn different skills and how they are applied in the workplace (Andriotis, 2017).

An instructional designer in the corporate sector will create engaging learning experiences like higher education. An instructional designer will often interview subject matter experts, write instructional content, design storyboards, and develop an interactive learning experience. The goal is to create training delivered as eLearning, face-to-face workshops, job aids, and other performance support solutions. An instructional designer will use instructional design models to help structure the learning material, but each model may have a unique
The ADDIE (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation) is a popular model. The model provides instructional designers with a streamlined, focused approach that provides feedback for continuous improvement (Quigley, 2019). Another widely used model is Merrill’s Principles of Instruction (MPI) which looks at the five learning principles. These are the task-centered principle, activation principle, demonstration principle, application principle, and integration principle (WRC, 2020). No matter which model is being used, this allows the instructional designer to visualize the training need and break down the process of designing training material into steps.

According to the Articulate Community (2021), there is a range of titles, for example, Instructional Designer, eLearning Developer (or Designer), Learning Experience Designer, Learning Strategist, Learning and Development Specialist, and Curriculum Developer. Career path-wise, an instructional designer might move into a senior or manager role, working with or supervising a team of other designers. Typically an instructional designer works in a company’s training and development department. The salary range varies depending on factors such as education, certifications, additional skills, and years in the profession (Salary.com, 2021). This role often appears on the 'top jobs' lists due to the high job satisfaction and the good work-life balance (CNN, 2021).

The core skill of an instructional designer is improving an individual's performance. This includes designing learning experiences, a system, or information and being a great communicator with words, visuals, and media. Individuals in this role come from various backgrounds and are passionate about designing high-quality, engaging learning experiences. A corporate instructional designer believes learning is about performance improvement and behavioral change, focusing on interactive learning experiences. While only some instructional design roles require you to know much about technology, most do. Most individuals in an instructional design role write the instruction and develop it into its final online or face-to-face format using various tools. Using technology like authoring tools (e.g., Articulate Storyline, Articulate Rise, Adobe Captivate, etc.) to develop courses is common for corporate instructional designers. Corporate instructional designers don’t use the same learning management systems in higher education. In summary, the instructional designer's job, like in higher education, is to create the best learning experiences for the students they serve. The major difference is in the tools, structure (reporting lines), and models.

Instructional Design in K-12 Education

In K-12, like Higher Education, education takes on a more holistic approach to learning – equipping students with knowledge from multiple disciplines (i.e., core subjects) – rather than developing specific skills (Andriotis, 2017). In an academic context, instructors primarily focus on knowledge transfer (Lynch, 2020).
In contrast to higher education and corporate instructional design, within a K-12 setting, instructional design work is almost entirely placed in the teachers' hands (Smith, 2011). Even though professional development or a Master's degree is necessary for teachers, there is not a required focus on instructional design specifically. Most educators are unaware of instructional design principles (Herron & Wolfe, 2021) or their impact on student learning. However, the shift to online pandemic teaching required most educators to quickly transform from face-to-face to virtual teaching environments (Hodges et al., 2020). One model created and deployed at this time was the CAFE model, which made many assumptions (i.e., knowing students and needs, available technology, and instructional content) to allow for a more streamlined approach (Wang, 2021).

Actual stand-alone positions as instructional designers within K12 settings are typically packaged within an instructional technologist, technology coach, or technology director role. In most cases, the teachers are the subject matter experts, technology integrators, and instructional designers, with some support from coaches if available. Although districts often employ technology coaches, their role is mainly to coordinate professional development, administrative work, and other faculty support, not instructional designer support. Therefore, the focus on K12 technology integration is often on tool use and not the overall design of instruction. However, instructional designer positions can be more easily found within large corporate K12 virtual schools or companies focused primarily on publishing developed content packages. Although this role can sometimes provide a great deal of autonomy in what materials are used, how they are presented, and how technology is integrated, these depend on the school district and administration for the guidelines for implementation.

The leading educational technologies utilized by K12 school districts are Google products, YouTube, and Kahoot (Staff, 2022). Google Classroom, Schoology, Moodle, and Canvas are the most commonly selected for districts utilizing a learning management system. Additional tools often integrated into the learning management system or used as stand-alone technologies are Seesaw, Flipgrid, Formative, Padlet, and Socrative.

The core focus of instructional design in K12 environments is to enhance student's learning experience by providing opportunities for deeper learning through simulations and layered experiences, collaboration, and digital skills development (Kosmas, 2022).

How are the Industries the Same?

Foundational instructional design practices apply across contexts, including consideration of learner characteristics, background knowledge, and motivation; alignment between learning outcomes, instructional content, and assessments; and an understanding of how to use technology to enable and support learning. Instructional designers' work is often a mix of independent and team-based projects and typically includes the following tasks use technology to enhance and support learning, focus on learning alignment, engage learners, and create assessments to evaluate learning.
To be successful in all sectors, instructional designers need the following skills:

- **Creativity:** Instructional designers use creativity to develop engaging learning experiences for their audience to develop engaging learning activities, create engaging learning environments and develop engaging learning experiences.

- **Communication:** Instructional designers must bridge multiple stakeholder groups, requiring verbal and nonverbal communication and interviewing skills. This also includes negotiation and diplomacy (Klein, 2014).

- **Technology:** Learning specific technologies for course development, authoring, and media development, as well as keeping current with emerging technologies (Klein, 2014)

- **Pedagogy:** Understanding how to design asynchronous, synchronous, and blended learning environments is important for all sectors, particularly following the pandemic (Klein, 2014). In addition, a growing weight is placed on understanding the integration of technology to enhance social presence (Sugar, 2016).

Lastly, no matter what sector, an instructional designer will design and create the content with the learner in mind for a user-centric experience. Much of what an instructional designer is doing is making sure the learner comes first. This allows the learner ample opportunities to reflect and process information and focus on it by prioritizing information (Khour, 2022). From a user experience (UX), the instructional designer finds ways to cut down long presentations (in a corporate setting or a classroom), break up unbroken text blocks, and reduce needless bells and whistles that might distract and overload attention (Khour, 2022).

**Conclusion**

Instructional design is not a new field; however, due to the pandemic, it is increasingly recognized as necessary. This field is always evolving, especially with technology. All sectors have leveraged the role of the instructional designer in creating meaningful learning environments. In each sector, we are rooted in the same learning theory, educational technology affordances, learning outcomes, assessment outcomes, and a focus on the learning experience. However, how these activities play out can vary depending on your location. It is important for individuals pursuing degrees in instructional design (and related fields) and those interested in instructional design work to be aware of these key industry differences. The practice of instructional design will further establish itself as a critical component of quality learning experiences. The future is promising for instructional designers as essential partners in learner success.
References


