Instructional Design in Higher Education: Defining an Evolving Field

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Introduction

This white paper provides an overview of the growing field of instructional design in higher education, from why the field is growing to how designers are functioning in their role. While the practice of instructional design dates to the 1940s (O'Malley, 2017), there is still much to be defined with respect to the role of instructional designers in higher education and what instructional designers are doing to meet the needs of higher education faculty and students. This white paper explores why there is a growing demand for designers, who is filling these roles, what the responsibilities of designers are, and how instructional designers are addressing the challenges they face. For further reading, a supplemental annotated bibliography is also available.

Growing Demand for Instructional Designers

The higher education landscape continues to change and evolve. Technological advancements mean that institutions can offer students more blended and distance learning opportunities. Traditional learning environments are also being enhanced by the integration of tools such as learning management systems, lecture capture systems, and collaborative platforms. Growing numbers of students are looking for more flexible formats for undertaking courses, certificates and degree programs. Findings from the 2017 Survey of Online Learning, conducted by the Babson Survey Research Group show that distance education enrollments are continuing to grow year to year, even as overall higher education enrollments begin to decline. As of fall 2016, there were over 6.3 million students taking at least one distance education course, comprising 31.6% of all higher education enrollments (Seaman, Allen & Seaman, 2018). As the technological

capabilities of institutions have improved and online learning has grown more popular, there has been an equivalent increase in demand for instructional designers in higher education institutions (Barrett, 2016). Faculty are facing increased pressure to provide more online and hybrid courses. However, what they are doing in their face-to-face classrooms does not translate to online instruction. In addition, the learning benefit of new tools cannot be automatically inferred. University administrators are recognizing that faculty need help to transition their face-to-face courses to teaching in an online environment (O'Malley, 2017). Consequently, instructional designers are emerging as pivotal players in navigating this transition.

Who Are Instructional Designers?

The origins of instructional design date back to World War II when the armed forces assembled groups of psychologists and academics to create training and assessment materials for troops (O'Malley, 2017). Today, an increasing number of colleges employ teams of instructional designers to support teaching and learning practices on their campuses. A 2016 report on the role, workflow, and experience of instructional designers, estimated that a minimum of 13,000 instructional designers now work on U.S college campuses (Intentional Futures, 2016). Despite their growing prominence in higher education, there is still a certain mystery surrounding who instructional designers are. In an attempt to answer this question, Intentional Futures (2016) surveyed 853 people in the field to explore their backgrounds, qualifications and employment histories. The findings revealed that instructional designers tend to hold advanced degrees and have a wide range of work experience:

- 87% of respondents have masters' degrees, and 32% have doctoral degrees.

- 57% have 3 to 11+ years of experience teaching in higher education.

- 53% have 3 to 11+ years of experience in technology development.

- 53% have 3 to 11+ years of experience in academic research roles.

- 42% have 3 to 11+ years of experience in graphic design.

These findings exemplify that the path into the profession varies from person to person and there is no universal profile of an instructional designer.

Defining an Instructional Designer's Role

While the field of instructional design and demand for professionals to fill instructional design, roles have expanded, there remains ambiguity for many as to what is encompassed by the role of an instructional designer. In part, this is attributed to their diverse responsibilities. Most instructional designers identify four categories of work they are responsible for: designing, managing, training, and providing support (Intentional Futures, 2016). In carrying out these responsibilities their work includes collaboration with an equally diverse range of colleagues. To add to the mix, the defined role of an instructional designer may vary not only between institutions, but within academic departments and offices at the same institution. These factors contribute to the ambiguity of the instructional designer role, as the area of focus varies between institutions and departments. Despite this ambiguity, the core goal of meeting objectives) remains a constant (Berrett, 2016). Instructional designers are focused on student success and use

a wide range of methods to achieve that goal and individual circumstances shape what role an instructional designer is most needed to emphasize in a given learning environment.

In addition to the roles discussed above, instructional designers are becoming more and more involved in teaching and learning research. A survey of 311 instructional designers conducted by Oregon State University's Ecampus Research Unit found that 71.4% of respondents were engaged in research activities in the year leading up to the survey, with 49.2% engaging specifically in research on teaching and learning (Linder and Dello Stritto, 2017). This study shines a light on a fifth category, research, that may be a significant part of the responsibilities of instructional designers. Important points to consider in light of this information is that only 24.8% of instructional designers have research as a part of their job description and when surveyed about confidence levels in completing research tasks respondents reported "low confidence" in nearly half of the thirteen tasks (Linder and Dello Stritto, 2017). This underscores an area in which instructional designers need more support to complete these tasks as well as recognition through job descriptions and evaluations of this category of work that many seem to be silently conducting.

Effective Practices of Instructional Designers

Instructional designers identify "struggling to collaborate with faculty" as their top challenge, followed by lack of time and resources (Intentional Futures, 2016). A common question overheard at conference workshops among instructional designers is, "How do you get faculty buy-in?" Why is buy-in a barrier? In part, instructional designers point to a misconception held

by many, that online learning works using a "set it and forget it", crock pot style approach (Intentional Futures, 2016). Another barrier to collaboration is the concern of faculty that their course will lose its personal touch in the design process and the student will become just a number as the entire learning process is mechanized (Berrett, 2016). One strategy being employed by instructional designers to address this is to implement an instructor driven process that preserves the human element. At the University of Arizona, designers begin their conversations with instructors by asking how they are teaching concepts to their face to face classes and using that as the bridge to discuss how that can be translated to the online classroom (Berrett, 2016). This aligns with a common practice by designers in working with faculty, which is to reassure faculty that everyone's end goal is to do what is best for students and that they are there to support the faculty and preserve the human element of the learning process (Berrett, 2016). Efforts to connect instructional designers to share best practices in overcoming barriers exist and have proved to be effective. Penn State University and Educause partnered to created ID2ID, a peer mentoring initiative for instructional designers. Designers apply to serve in either a mentor or mentee role and meet throughout the year to talk about best practices, challenges and other topics related to the field. Now in its second-year feedback has been positive and organizers are looking for ways to improve and expand the program.

Defining an Evolving Field

Instructional Design is a dynamic and fluid field. This white paper explored recent literature on the topic in an attempt to bring the field into focus. It is clear, however, despite recent progress, that a consensus has yet to be reached in defining the various aspects of this evolving field. As

the role becomes more clearly defined faculty will have a better understanding and awareness of what their relationship should look like, resulting in improved recognition of the part that designers play in the higher education system. Next steps for accomplishing this goal include:

- Expanding efforts to share research and best practices;

- Improving training and development processes;

- Clearly outlining industry standards for the field; and

- Identifying practices to improve instructional designer career pathways.

Conclusion

As online and distance learning continues to grow in popularity, the demand for instructional designers will continue to increase. As the field grows, a clearer picture will emerge that defines the kind of work that designers do. While there is no defined career path for entry into the field, more standardization is emerging along with degree and certificate programs to facilitate the process. As these various aspects of instructional design become more clearly defined, it will become easier for designers to connect and share best practices. While organizations have begun this effort, it is in its infancy and a strong support network will be vital to the field's growth and to the success of professionals doing instructional design work. These developments are important components in developing a clear understanding of the field of instructional design.

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