New Directions in Instructional Design
Keeping Pace in a Time of Rapid Change

A REPORT ON THE 2017 ELI FOCUS SESSION

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The 2017 ELI Focus Session was held April 19 and 20 to explore current issues in instructional design, collectively seeking ways to best support our institutions. The entire focus session was recorded and is available online.

Introduction

Instructional designers span a wide range of skills, duties, and titles, and although the field goes back generations, the infusion of technology has resulted in fundamental changes in instructional designer responsibilities, the tools available, and the models used. Instructional design is always reinventing itself and has become central to innovation in teaching and learning. Technology is changing, higher education is changing, and the role of the instructional designer is changing. This new importance brings significant challenges, as instructional design must keep pace with—if not remain a step or two ahead of—new directions and opportunities to support learners.

The 2017 ELI Focus Session, “New Directions in Instructional Design: Keeping Pace in a Time of Rapid Change,” was built around several questions about how instructional design and its practitioners are changing to meet new needs:

- What new organizational models and practices do instructional design teams need to adopt?
- How can instructional designers best make use of the increasing amount of learning data available?
- What kinds of evidence-based practices make the most sense for instructional designers?
- What professional development approaches provide structure for instructional designers to share their mutual areas of expertise, while focusing on key areas of professional growth?

Even as the role of the instructional designer changes, the fundamental goal of the position remains relatively steady: to help faculty and other instructors design and implement learning activities appropriate to the goals of the course, as well as the assessments to measure student progress toward those goals. What is different are the models of education, the tools for learning and assessment, and the kinds and amount of data that come from and also inform learning. Learning spaces are
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evolving, textbooks are becoming applications, and new ways to recognize learning are gaining currency.

These and other changes require instructional designers to develop new skills and competencies and to work in different ways with constituents around the campus. Professional titles for those working in instructional design are changing, and although the range of backgrounds, training, and skills among instructional designers has always been broad, it’s just getting broader.

Important trends influence the evolution of instructional design, and the opening presentation of the focus session listed 10 such trends, setting the stage for the presentations to follow:

1. **Design Thinking:** Though it might appear to simply be a recasting of longstanding instructional design practices, design thinking is fundamentally distinct and applicable to course design, especially the empathetic aspect.

2. **Serious Game Design:** The principles of game design can have real impacts on the dynamic of teaching and learning, so much so that, at least in some cases, the outcomes are far better when the activity seems like learning and more game-like.

3. **Learning Analytics:** As the kinds and amounts of learning data increase, the opportunities to use those data to improve learning will continue to expand.

4. **Adaptive Learning:** As learning analytics matures, it creates feedback loops (to learners, to instructors, and to educational models) that allow for variable pathways through learning.

5. **The Slow Death of Testing:** By increasingly having data that show—at any point in a learning experience—the level of mastery students have, the need for cumulative exams wanes. Testing continues to have value as a formative tool and as a learning experience but becomes less important for assessment.

6. **Fitbit Goes to School:** The concept of the Fitbit—which provides feedback and data without having explicit goals—will move into education, tying into self-directed and self-organized learning.

7. **Siri, Cortana, and Alexa Go to School:** Virtual, intelligent agents will be in greater demand when designing learning environments that are intuitive, enabling familiar interaction with devices.

8. **Unbundled Education:** Given the number and range of developments, higher education will increasingly rely on partnerships with entities with specialized
skills in certain areas, resulting in an ecosystem of pieces that fit together like a puzzle.

9. **Microcredentials**: Digital badges and similar microcredentials are going to gain traction, with particular value in the metadata, which can allow organizations and individuals to connect in new ways.

10. **Virtual and Augmented Reality**: Most institutions have done relatively little with these technologies thus far, but as prices drop and devices proliferate, such tools will become increasingly relevant to course design and learning.

The ideas presented in the focus session suggest thinking about this evolution in terms of two questions: Where is instructional design going, and how do we get there?

### Where Are We Going?

As Yogi Berra told us, “If you don’t know where you are going, you’ll end up someplace else.” Change can be disorienting, and a vital part of successfully evolving to meet the needs of tomorrow is a picture (or a relatively clear outline) of where you are trying to get. For the instructional designer, three key themes help describe where the role is headed.

#### Alignment

The pursuit of alignment, in various forms, should be a guiding principle for instructional designers going forward, though as one presenter observed, “alignment still eludes many in higher education.” Alignment between learning goals, activities, and assessments has always been a core part of instructional design, and achieving that kind of alignment takes on new dimensions as the tools and technologies of learning and assessment continually change.

Alignment with institutional strategic directions is increasingly part of what instructional designers do. Institutional goals could include extending educational access to nontraditional students, who might include dual-enrollment high school students, returning students, current and former members of the military, noncredit students, and others. Instructional designers have an opportunity—and an obligation—to develop learning resources that are well suited for the kinds of students to whom the institution caters. In some cases, open educational
resources (OER) are part of an institutional strategic plan, and instructional designers need to understand the benefits and limitations of using open resources.

**Accessibility and Universal Design**

Access for learners with disabilities is an issue of growing concern and attention in higher education. Because instructional designers work at the intersection of pedagogy and learning technologies, they are in an excellent position to apply best practices for accessibility to educational activities and resources. The migration of courses from face-to-face environments to online and hybrid models only serves to increase the importance of issues related to accessibility. The range of IT tools and services continues to expand, and institutions that fail to provide accessible options disenfranchise certain students (and faculty) and expose themselves to legal and reputational consequences. Instructional designers who understand accessibility can be invaluable today—one focus session presenter recommended that all instructional designers take a course on accessibility.

At the same time, awareness of universal design for learning (UDL) is growing on many campuses. UDL aims to design products and services so that they are accessible by all users, without separate accommodations. Instructional designers have an opportunity to help their institutions understand and address the areas of overlap and divergence between accessibility and universal design.

**Influence**

As higher education increasingly moves to online and hybrid models, instructional designers have an opportunity to develop greater influence with faculty and academic leaders. Some faculty might question why they need help designing online courses, since they don’t receive similar support for face-to-face courses. Perhaps more design support for face-to-face education would be valuable, but what’s clear is that the pedagogy and opportunities for online and hybrid learning are sufficiently different from those of face-to-face settings to justify what is sometimes a requirement to seek support from an instructional designer. Faculty are subject-matter experts, and many lack formal training in pedagogy. The breadth of online learning provides instructional designers an important opening to help faculty devote their energy to the academic material.

It’s important that instructional designers be seen not as simply promoting new technologies but as providing expertise in pedagogy, including new models of education, personalized and adaptive learning principles, competency-based education,
and others. By doing this, and by providing evidence of the value and outcomes from different approaches, instructional designers can build influence and trust with faculty, helping course designs be more effective. Design thinking can be an important methodology in this regard, particularly the step involving empathy.

How Do We Get There?

Knowing where you are going is one thing. Knowing how to get there can be quite another. The focus session highlighted several key considerations for instructional designers as they develop their roles and responsibilities.

Analytics

If there was a single topic that garnered the most attention and the most questions at the focus session, it would be analytics. Because the profound changes for instructional design largely stem from the introduction of technology into all aspects of teaching, one of the most consequential issues is what to do with all the data. By now, learning analytics has been around for some time, but it remains opaque for many in higher education. It’s imperative for instructional designers to cultivate an understanding of data, the relevant analytics, and what the tools can and cannot do.

Instructional designers need to incorporate analytics into what they do, and it’s important to understand the relationship between analytics and learning. For the most part, analytics doesn’t directly measure learning but instead relies on proxies for learning. Nevertheless, the insights that can be gained from learning data can be used to support personalized and adaptive learning and can guide the design of learning activities and assessments. Learning data feed into predictive models that instructional designers and faculty can use to forecast student struggles and design around them. There is a lot of data, though, so it’s vital to be intentional about what data are collected and how those data are used. One participant suggested building relationships with registrars—they have lots of data, and they have their own questions they would like to answer with data. And, as more sources and kinds of data are introduced into analytics tools, questions of student and faculty privacy come to the fore.
Culture Change

Increasing the authority and enhancing the reputation of instructional designers among faculty and academic leaders will typically require cultural changes in an institution. As one participant noted, technology is cultural, and so is teaching and learning. Actively managing such change is important because, of course, if you don’t purposely shape culture, it will take on its own form, one that might not serve you well. To be effective, an instructional designer must address faculty reluctance and build trust in the work of the designer, using basic principles of how to influence people. Faculty need to be convinced that the guidance provided by instructional design will benefit students (as well as benefiting the faculty themselves).

In many cases, helping instructors understand how best to teach online is the vital work of the instructional designer. A focus session participant suggested a tactic of using education about specific tools and applications to engage faculty, and then steering the conversation to ways to structure learning activities for better outcomes. They come for the technology and stay for the pedagogy.

One presentation at the focus session covered an initiative to reorient the model of instructional design at the entire institution. Prior to this effort, the approach to online course development was simply to move a face-to-face course into a different medium. Culturally, support for developing online courses was loose—courses were built on textbooks, compensation was inconsistent, and courses varied in quality and consistency. By successfully changing the culture, the institution was able to introduce a model in which online development “drives the bus.” Online courses are built using the principles instructional design, and then hybrid and face-to-face courses are adapted from the online version.

To do this, the institution established instructional design standards and hired instructional designers. A strict and clear process was created to develop courses, and the faculty role and compensation were updated to be fair and reasonable. The institution empowered instructional designers. Rather than their being seen as admins for faculty, they became project managers for the course designs. Despite initial resistance from some faculty, many were ultimately persuaded by the quality of the courses that resulted from the process. The institution now redesigns a hundred courses a year and maintains a database to manage these projects, providing accountability transparency. OER was also part of this process, which was another point of resistance that was overcome, helping faculty to see OER as liberating.
Standardized and Individualized Models

With a traditional higher education model, courses are developed individually, based on the particular needs and choices of an instructor, either working alone or in consultation with instructional designers and perhaps others. With a standardized model, a framework serves as the basis for multiple courses, ensuring at least a baseline level of consistency across courses. A standardized model offers economies of scale by setting at least some of the structural elements, and the resulting course can typically be more easily taught by multiple instructors.

Some faculty see standardized designs as a threat to academic freedom. In those cases, the instructional designer must convince them that the model will allow them to have more time to do what they do—teach in their discipline. A metaphor that was suggested to explain the difference is that of physical buildings: Faculty don’t build buildings or assemble desks, which isn’t their expertise, but they can—within limits—rearrange the furniture to best suit their needs.

The models represent a spectrum, not an either-or choice. A course-design model could range from being highly standardized to highly individualized, and the goal is to strike the right balance between ensuring consistency and quality across courses and maintaining academic freedom and autonomy. The best place on the spectrum varies by institution, and instructional designers can influence (but not decide) where an institution falls on the spectrum.

At the same time, guaranteeing the quality of online courses can be challenging, and Quality Matters was mentioned several times during the focus session as one strong option for meeting this goal. In some cases, institutions have created course development programs that include checklists and templates aligned with Quality Matters. This model can be appealing to faculty because of its rigor and assurances of excellence.

Instructional designers need to understand how best to achieve balance in the way courses are developed and in their dynamic with faculty. Again, it becomes a question of confidence in the function of instructional design and the value it can provide to students and faculty.

ID2ID: A Peer-Mentoring Program

Given the magnitude of responsibilities that fall under instructional design, and given that many instructional designers don’t have formal training in the field,
professional development and support can be hard to find. Several years ago, Penn State launched a program to provide exactly that kind of support and resources for instructional designers, and the effort has recently expanded into a partnership with EDUCAUSE to include all of higher education. The **ID2ID program** is a peer-mentoring program that “provides instructional designers an opportunity to engage a community of colleagues across higher education institutions that share the same passion for advancing teaching and learning.” Characterized as “matchmaking for instructional designers,” the program facilitates peer and mentoring relationships in which the participants work together on professional development. The personalized experience could include joint undertakings, a capstone project, or other activities that participants believe would satisfy specific professional development needs. Areas of interest could include faculty development, academic transformation, digital literacies, accessibility, assessment, learning analytics, OER, and learning spaces. The program is free and open to anyone interested.

**Conclusion**

Higher education is in a state of transition—some would say transformation—with new educational models, a growing lineup of tools and technologies, and different cohorts of students with varying educational goals. These disruptions strain the designs of conventional courses, while creating promising opportunities for how and where learning happens. Faculty increasingly turn to instructional designers to unravel and organize the many possibilities for how to design courses, learning activities, and assessments. Instructional designers are called on for everything from training faculty on the LMS to designing fully online/hybrid courses. And some faculty are less eager than others to collaborate with an instructional designer, increasing the value of negotiation and persuasion for a designer.
Research can be an important part of the dynamic between instructional designers and faculty, and it’s crucial that designers remember that their job is to support the faculty rather than impose anything on them. Many factors are involved, including funding, governance and organizational structure, policy, and, of course, institutional culture. As one focus session participant pointed out, if your institutional leadership doesn’t know the difference between technology and instructional design, you’ve got a problem. Be patient, be persistent, and play the long game. As the saying goes, it’s a journey, not a destination.

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