

Chapter 2

Resisting the Deprofessionalization of Instructional Design

Matthew M. Acevedo
University of Miami, USA

Gustavo Roque
Florida International University, USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors present the argument that instructional design as a professional field in higher education spaces is at risk of deprofessionalization, resulting from their common utilization as technical or production personnel, coupled with the fact that development of and within online and technology-enabled learning environments is increasingly accessible to faculty members and non-experts. As learning management systems and multimedia production platforms continue to become increasingly easy to use and normalized, the technical expertise of technically oriented, development-focused instructional designers risks becoming obsolete, irrelevant, or redundant. This chapter charts the trajectory of this deprofessionalization and presents strategies for how instructional designers—and the field as a whole—should assert its value through a scholar-practitioner approach that privileges the specialized faculties of instructional design (e.g., learning theory, design process models, pedagogy, design thinking) over production or development skills.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-4975-8.ch002

INTRODUCTION

Does the specter of death loom over the field of instructional design? Has the death knell rung for our field? Certainly not, but recent reports suggest the possibility simply by raising the question. Morbidly featuring the image of a deceased bird in its introduction, an eLearning Guild report asks, “Is Instructional Design a Dying Art?” (Vipond, 2017), before cynically lamenting “Here we go again.” (p. 3). This report is problematic in a number of ways. First, the very question presupposes that instructional design is an art, which it is not, nor is it a science (Boling & Smith, 2012). Instructional design is a design field, with clear differentiations between art, science, and craft. Second, it fails to adequately address the nuances in the different subfields of instructional design, such as higher education, corporate training, K-12, and others. In this chapter, we are concerned not with some sort of impending death of instructional design in higher education, for it is not dying. However, we do contend that the trajectory of the instructional design field in the higher education space is at risk of deprofessionalization, propelled by the increasing ubiquity and pervasiveness of the Internet as an instructional medium. Distinct from death, which implies a withering and eventual disappearance, deprofessionalization involves a reformulation and transmutation of the field’s essence to one which relies less on specialists who exercise disciplined skill sets and more on lower paid, less skilled generalists. The purpose of this chapter is to chart the nature of this trajectory and suggest strategies for how practitioners – and the field as a whole – should re-assert its contribution within higher education. While we acknowledge that instructional designers work in a variety of contexts and instructional modalities in higher education, such as faculty development, our argument is focused on instructional designers working primarily in online and distance education spaces, as these are the designers most commonly found in institutions of higher education and are also the most at risk of the dangers we discuss herein.

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGNERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Instructional design as a field of practice within higher education manifested in tandem with the increasing adoption of the Internet as an educational platform (Reiser, 2011), and the growth in the need for instructional designers was concomitant with the growth of online learning offerings. The multi-faceted skill sets of instructional designers, experts in learning and adept with technology, were leveraged in order

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