

Chapter I

Instructional Designers' Perceptions of Their Agency: Tales of Change and Community

Richard A. Schwier, University of Saskatchewan, Canada

Katy Campbell, University of Alberta, Canada

Richard F. Kenny, Athabasca University, Canada

Abstract

Instructional designers provide more than service in the design and development of instruction; they also act as social change agents. This chapter draws on the stories of instructional designers to develop a model of change agency that includes interpersonal, professional, institutional and societal dimensions. The model provides guidance for the development of new skills in instructional design, for serious reflection by instructional designers about their own influence as agents, and for graduate programs in instructional design to address agency.

Introduction

In addition to the important role instructional designers play in the design and development of instructional products and programs, they also act in communities of practice as agents in changing the way traditional colleges and universities implement their missions. Designers work directly with faculty and clients to help them think more critically about the needs of all learners, issues of access, social and cultural implications of information technologies, alternative learning environments (e.g., workplace learning), and related policy development. As such, through reflexive practice, interpersonal agency and critical practice, they are important participants in shaping interpersonal, institutional and societal agendas for change.

This chapter will draw on the stories of instructional designers in higher education to highlight their interpretations of their own agency in each context. In essence, this chapter deviates from the understanding of a case study as occurring in a single setting in that it draws on the experiences of several instructional designers in several contexts. Rather, we accept Yin's (2003, p. 13) definition of case study as a research strategy; that is, as an empirical inquiry that "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context," and view our study in this regard as a multiple-case design with the instructional designer as the unit of analysis. Taken as a group, these designers tell a strong story of struggle and agency in higher education contexts, and it is a story that portrays designers as active, moral, political and influential in activating change. So from their rich descriptions of practice, we attempt in this chapter to weave a composite case study of an instructional designer's experience that is true to the collective narrative of the designers we have interviewed. Any single person's story of agency is by necessity narrow and contextually bound, and these are both the greatest strengths and limitations of individual cases. We hope that by viewing the stories of instructional designers through the macro lens of narrative, we can better illustrate the scope of agency and community that instructional designers practice each day.

Background

Conventional literature in instructional design concentrates very intensively on process—how instructional design is carried out, what strategies and approaches work in various contexts, and how designers should systematically practice their craft (e.g., Dick Carey, & Carey, 2005; Morrison, Ross, & Kemp, 2004; Seels & Glasgow, 1998; Shambaugh & Magliaro, 2005; Smith & Ragan, 2005). Models no doubt serve a useful purpose, one part of which is to help ground our identities as practitioners. Bichelmeyer, Smith & Hessig (2004) asked ID practitioners what instructional design and technology meant to them, and while the most frequent response was that it was broad and diffuse, the second most frequent response was the ADDIE (analyze, design, develop, implement, evaluate) model or systematic design of instruction. This may signal the possibility of developmental levels—stages of development or growth in an individual's agency. It seems overall that younger or less experienced designers tend to talk about tasks and technologies rather than larger implications of their work (Schwier, 2004, October). But the actual use to which ADDIE and similar systematic

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