

Instructional Design: Institutional Preparedness

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The position of an Instructional Designer for a small campus is necessarily informed by institutional effectiveness. It is this office where the ongoing discussion about what is done well, and what is done poorly begins. How does an institution know if it is doing its job and what are its goals? In his book, Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds, Dr. Richard Light asks the question, “who around here is examining the effectiveness of what we do?” Well he spent the next ten years doing anecdotal interviews with students trying ascertain what students and faculty were doing that worked for them and which things did not. These very simple questions are at the heart of instructional design: How effective are we at doing what we purport to do? If we are doing it well or poorly how will we know? What are the indicators, and whom are we asking if we are truly succeeding?

These are simple questions but the answers are not. As educators we are not first about the bottom line, nor FTE. But this is a valuable indicator. We are not first about cost/benefit ratios, nor about aesthetics. The school's first and foremost task and measure should be how are we serving our customers? Instructional Design 101 discusses the method of course design as it starts with “desired outcomes and acceptable evidence.” An instructional designer is a resource person for the institution to assist in the alignment of curriculum and strategies with a stated goal, and perhaps in keeping with a given methodology (or philosophy). This is a critical understanding as there are perhaps a hundred roads to the destination, but there must be some concrete recognition of best-practice, or there will be no fashion for choosing strategies and techniques that are in keeping with the institution's intention.

The areas that it will impact the most seem to be:

1. Academic-degree program planning and methodology
2. Instructional technology adoption efforts.
3. Distance education.

The “continuing education” areas within a community college seem to offer themselves to less scrutiny, and the instructors in this domain often respond better to a just-in-time professional development model. As so many of the faculty in this area are part-time, and bring the only credentials with them that they need, it is difficult to think that these individuals will have the time or incentive offered to reshape their abilities and pedagogy to a school-adopted philosophy on appropriate instruction.

Academic Degree Programs

Although the position of instructional designer may certainly be adopted and adapted in many ways I will outline a few considerations that I feel will make it as helpful, influential and cost effective as possible. Firstly, as mentioned in the introduction, if this person is a resource, there must be an incentive to have faculty avail themselves to work with him or her to revisit course design. If this is ad-hoc, the time constraints of the faculty's prep time is generally prohibitive for allowing significant, systemic, change of method and/or content. Part of this incentive should be funding, recognition, flextime, and technology provisions. *(By this final incentive, it is common in many places for those who learn a piece of software to receive a copy or gadget for their use.)*

The position of Instructional designer is based on the premise that the institution has a call for consistent and incremental alteration of current practice. This may sound absurdly obvious, but it is not if the environment is driven by the status quo. If the faculty are all over-taxed with just keeping up, much less improving, they will have little motivation to involve themselves with the role of an outsider making recommendations about how they should do their job differently. New faculty may be the most open to it, but this becomes much more like a mentorship program, or first-year internship process. The faculty who are long-timers basically dictate the culture of the institution. It is possible, although unusual, that this group would see the need and be willing to invest the time to rethink and revisit how it is that they do their job.

The fact is that this group of faculty and department heads may well feel that they are doing just fine "thank you very much" and this is just so much more fluff that the administration is offering them. This is consistently the common response. It is not a matter of unmotivated faculty, but of human nature, and the finite amount of time that exists. In an ideal situation faculty would recognize the need for continuity between courses and curriculum within and across domains. They would then meet periodically to discuss those teaching strategies and techniques of planning, assessing and altering educational activities to meet the needs of their students, all the while adopting new technologies and methods as research informs.

Yet, schools where this kind of activity is underway are being intentional and working on faculty buy-in and with administrative mandate. The most significant effect that this role can play on a campus is in response to the institutional recognition that best practice is a moving target. Faculty and staff should be informed of current practice and should be revisiting their syllabi at regular intervals looking for ways to better serve their students.

Further, it should be recognized that instructors and faculty need to be informed by one another's successes and challenges. Courses are generally not stand-alones, certainly not in the academic degree programs. Campuses nationwide have discovered that inter-disciplinary and holistic instruction are a benefit to the student and to the institution. But this does not happen by itself. This too may be facilitated by an instructional designer.

The use of this position must be preceded by an institutional commitment to the scope and breadth of the impact desired. If the administration has a specific agenda, which has been adopted by the faculty and this is coupled with a timeline, then there is a starting place for serious incremental transformation of courses across domains. But in order to begin, the institution has to know what result they are trying to achieve. It is not enough to say, "we want them to do better." This is antithetical to instructional design. If one hires a person to function in this role and asks them to put up a lemonade stand with the sign, "will do instructional design," again, there is no reason to believe that this would have an institutional-culture impact. The goal is to adopt an institutional model that has some kind of definition for best practice. Otherwise it is arbitrary whether anything meaningful is being approached, or if it is, that one would know it.

This discernable goal must be accompanied by a model of the types of instruction the school feels is most appropriate according to content area and field. An excellent model that is being endorsed on many campuses is "engaged learning." Jones, Valdez, Nowakowski, and Rasmussen (1994). This is strongly Constructivist and learner-centered. If an institution claims this as a direction, it endorses, as a collective, certain premises. If this or another over-riding philosophy is agreed upon then there is a general direction prescribed. Clearly, this is not a one-size-fits-all adoption. Nor can it be prescribed as some faddish model that will be replaced by another the following year. In order for any change of scale to be effective it must be crafted according to current research and individual institution use. This means that whatever model is adopted, it is done so thoughtfully, altered according to need, and put in place with the understanding that it serves as a living document of sorts: incrementally evolving to accommodate the changing direction of the school and to emphasize the nature of true best practice. It is also vital that the model selected by any given institution is authentic to that locale. This is in strong contrast to educational trends that are tied to educational jargon, that are dated as they are first engendered.

There must be a "standard system" in place for this. After defining institutional philosophy and establishing the model, then one must determine the mechanism to share and enforce this as the campus-wide goal, however vague or specific. Clearly, this goes to institutional effectiveness. If there is an institutional commitment to a systemic measurable outcome, it is likely that the role of an instructional designer would be key. But the wage of this individual would be only part of the expense. As I mentioned, this discussion includes the cost of the peripherals, the stipends for instructors and the system put in place to reward or address compliance. Also, if technology training is a vital component in the role of the designer/technologist, the plan might well include a transition to a comprehensively technology-rich environment. This assumes that the faculty will be able to have the software and hardware to implement the things that they would be taught to adopt. All of these expenses should be considered as part of the commitment to the position's efficacy.

Instructional Technology

As indicated, instructional technology is certainly an important part of professional development ancillaries offered in support of the above-described evolution. These exist on a continuum with fully-remotely delivered courses on one end of the scale, and technology reinforced courses (or hybrids) on the other. As education continues quaking under the computer revolution of the 80's it will slowly come back to itself with an objective value assigned to these various technologies. They will be put to measure in the context of these intervening years. Some technology is vital. Some may be no more than the eight-track-player of pedagogy. Yet, as the merit and demerits of certain technologies become apparent, it is also certain that to remain aware, relevant and current instructors in all fields will need an increased skill set in technology. This can be, and has been, grossly overstated, but regardless, certain techniques for presentation, communication and productivity are going to be here for the long term, and our students will rightly anticipate a faculty with the skills to employ these as they are proven important and useful.

As certain technologies do demonstrate their benefits, the college campus is then obligated to provide them at some level, or to become anachronistic (either by choice or budgetary dictate). I point this out because another role of the instructional designer is often to serve as instructional technologist. Yet here the mandate is slightly different. In this circumstance the professional development is not based in theory and the sharing of new research. For technology to be adopted it must first, simply, exist. The instructional designer in this regard becomes purchasing

consultant. A campus that has no budget for technology and support, has no method for saying that these affordances are important for the faculty to adopt. There should be an incremental, intentional and comprehensive technology plan in place for the school to direct appropriate purchases in a systematic and informed fashion, of software and hardware that complements learning. If this exists then it can be coupled with a professional development plank, which also ties back to the institutional effectiveness goals. To teach PowerPoint or web development when no uniform decisions have been made as to the appropriateness of this method of instructing is putting the cart well ahead of the horse.

Distance Education

Distance education has been embraced by campuses like a child collecting a stray puppy. This is adoption that precedes commitment. Instead of setting up policies of appropriate use and an academically sound implementation plan, and counting the costs to both support budgets and reputation, many schools saw this as a race for the student dollar and classless FTE. The advent of the radio and the television were both seen as terrific arbiters of educational demand. Yet they did little more to alter access to education than the filmstrip projector. These, and computers, and other technologies will have a significant, ongoing impact on education. But the nature, value and sustainability of them are not yet known. What is known is that often courses put forward with a college's brand on it, would be an embarrassment if they had been offered in a traditional class setting. What is worse than this, is that many campuses really have no idea what is going on on an instructional level.

This is because these distance-ed. departments are often treated like stepchildren: ignored or resented by the department that is over them; and relegated to teacher-for-hire development; and the only oversight given them is from some non-academic technician. Instructional design implies some quality and standard of development that precedes and is of more import than the speed of development and quantity of course offerings. There must be a checks-and-balances process put in place with every course to ensure content and methodology that is in keeping with the institution as a whole. However, this too is an area that can be fraught with political ownership issues, as technicians and departments often do not want to offer up courses already in place up to institutional scrutiny.

Working as a Team

It can happen that an institution, which has intentionally fragmented its efforts into departments, can find that putting Humpty-Dumpty together again is a very hard task. An instructional designer may be given the

charge of assisting individuals, but this will be neither systemic, nor can it truly be content specific. The designer might work with the school by department. But the multi-disciplinary element may well be weakened if this is the only interface directed by the leadership. The most effective method for this position to impact a culture shift is working with the whole first, then breaking it down into subgroups. This can happen only if it is in response to leadership's willingness to direct change. If the campus as a whole has some agreed-upon values and philosophy then there exists a goal to which they may aspire. This should be tied to specific, agreed-upon measures and standards. These should be across domain. If these hard decisions are made and the need is defined, then one has a starting place for instructional design.