Enhancing Cultural Competency for Instructional Designers Through the Use of Reciprocal Learning

Amy Pate

cultural competency   Instructional Design   reciprocal learning

Reciprocal learning enhances cultural competency among instructional designers while addressing broader challenges in instructional design and aligning with Learning Engineering principles. As instructional designers navigate diverse learning environments, they must balance accessibility, equity, and engagement while integrating emerging technologies and data-driven decision-making. However, training often lacks structured opportunities to develop cultural empathy, active listening, and reflective practice. To bridge these gaps, this study examines how integrating international professionals into a reciprocal learning framework fosters inclusive course

design, learner diversity, and global perspectives. Findings highlight deficiencies in current training and demonstrate how structured reflection, peer collaboration, and iterative learning cycles advance human-centered design and instructional adaptability. Applying Learning Engineering methodologies, reciprocal learning fosters collaborative problem-solving and scalable professional development, equipping instructional designers to create adaptive, inclusive, and technology-integrated learning experiences in an evolving educational landscape.

Introduction

Instructional designers across higher education often lack formal training in global course design, relying heavily on frameworks like Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Quality Matters (QM). While these frameworks provide structure, they do not always account for the complexities of designing for diverse global learners (Gunawardena, 2021). This challenge extends beyond Arizona State University (ASU), which serves as the case study for this research. Institutions worldwide face similar gaps in cultural competency training for instructional designers. As universities expand international programs and online education reaches broader audiences, instructional designers must develop the skills to create inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments (Rogers et al., 2007).

This study explores how ASU used reciprocal learning—a process that fosters peer-to-peer knowledge exchange, active listening, and structured reflection—can serve as a professional development model to bridge this gap. By embedding reciprocal learning into instructional design training, institutions can cultivate cultural empathy, self-awareness, and the ability to design relevant educational experiences across diverse cultural contexts.

Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method participatory action research (PAR) approach, utilizing a descriptive case study to examine the impact of reciprocal learning on the development of ethnorelative worldviews among instructional designers. The research was conducted over six weeks, incorporating qualitative and quantitative data collection methods.

Participants

Ten instructional designers were selected through purposeful sampling to ensure diverse representation of cultural backgrounds and professional experiences. The group included:

1. ASU instructional designers work in online and hybrid course development.
2. International Instructional Professionals recruited through institutional partnerships, representing universities in Finland, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Argentina, and Mexico.

Data Collection Methods

The study integrated multiple data points to triangulate findings:

1. Pre- and Post-Study Surveys: Participants completed the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES) to measure baseline cultural competency and self-awareness.
2. Reflective Journals: Participants submitted structured reflections after each reciprocal learning session to document personal insights and challenges.
3. Session Recordings & Transcripts: Three structured Zoom-based reciprocal learning sessions were recorded, transcribed, and coded for key themes.
4. Final Semi-Structured Interviews: Individual interviews were conducted post-study to capture participant experiences, self-reported learning, and perspectives on the effectiveness of reciprocal learning.
5. Participant-Generated Learning Artifacts: Assignments such as needs analyses and resource-sharing documents were reviewed for evidence of applied learning.

Connection to Learning Engineering

Learning Engineering is a process and practice that applies the learning sciences using human-centered design and engineering methodologies and data-informed decision-making to support learners and their development. This study aligns with Learning Engineering by integrating reciprocal learning as a human-centered, data-informed approach to professional development for instructional designers (Goodell & Kolodner, 2022).

The reciprocal learning framework used in this study reflects Learning Engineering's design cycle loop thinking, which emphasizes iterative improvement through structured reflection and collaborative knowledge exchange. Participants engaged in cycles of teaching, listening, reflecting, and applying new knowledge, mirroring the iterative processes of Learning Engineering. Throughout the study, data collection methods—including peer feedback, reflective journaling, and self-assessments—provided insights that informed subsequent learning cycles, allowing for continual refinement of cultural competency skills.

Wagner (2022) underscores the critical role of instructional designers in Learning Engineering, emphasizing their responsibility to create personalized and immersive learning experiences that accommodate diverse student needs (Saçak, Bozkurt, & Wagner, 2022, p. 259). Instructional designers must move beyond static content delivery and embrace design thinking and learner experience-driven approaches to foster engagement and effectiveness. Reciprocal learning aligns with this mission by fostering cultural competency among

instructional designers, enabling them to create inclusive global learning environments. By fostering cultural empathy, self-awareness, and reflective practice, reciprocal learning equips instructional designers with the skills to navigate human-centered design's complexities in a Learning Engineering framework.

By embedding structured reflection and continuous feedback loops, reciprocal learning ensures that instructional designers adapt their approaches based on data-driven insights, making their designs more inclusive, culturally responsive, and aligned with global learner needs. This process enhances professional development and demonstrates how Learning Engineering principles can be applied to evolving fields such as global instructional design.

Competencies Needed for Instructional Designers

Instructional designers enhance learning environments through four key activities: conducting needs assessments, designing aligned instructional materials, assessing learning quality, and integrating engaging technologies. Standard frameworks, such as Quality Matters, UDL, and IBSTPI competencies, guide their practice by incorporating knowledge of instructional technology and course design (Abuhassna & Alnawajha, 2023). Additional skills include communication, project management, research, and data analysis. However, when designing for global learners, instructional designers must move beyond technical proficiency and develop cultural empathy, self-awareness, and cultural humility (Tracy, 2022). This study utilized the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES) to establish a baseline measure of participants' cultural competency and group identity. It indicated that the participants scored well in interpersonal engagement but indicated a growth opportunity for self-awareness and exploration outside their contexts.

This initial IES assessment indicated the need to develop skills in cultural empathy, self-awareness, and cultural humility further. Cultural empathy is the ability to adopt the perspective and experience another person's emotions. It is a critical skill for instructional designers to achieve while moving away from the formulaic practices of traditional design. Self-awareness develops from connecting with others, valuing their differences, and reflecting on personal context. It empowers people to avoid senseless, impulsive, and blind social behaviors. Although there are multiple frameworks for self-awareness, the emphasis is on reflection and examining one's perceptions, values, and biases. Cultural humility is the term emerging from the discussion that cultural competence is not a linear process with an end goal. Cultural humility recognizes knowledge and perspective limitations and promotes a continuous self-assessment and growth analysis cycle (Wright et al., 2021). Reciprocal learning is one model for developing these competencies.

Reciprocal Learning: A Pathway to Cultural Competency

This study introduces a reciprocal learning model that allows instructional designers to engage directly with international peers. Through structured interactions, instructional designers build critical skills such as cultural empathy, self-awareness, and the ability to listen actively to the needs of culturally diverse students. By engaging instructional designers as both learners and teachers, reciprocal learning fosters a dynamic environment that nurtures ethnorelative worldviews. Many of the twenty-two core skills identified in the IBSTPI standards align well with reciprocal learning, including oral and written communication, reflective practice, and collaboration skills (IBSTPI, 2022).

Figure 1

Individual Reciprocal Learning Stages
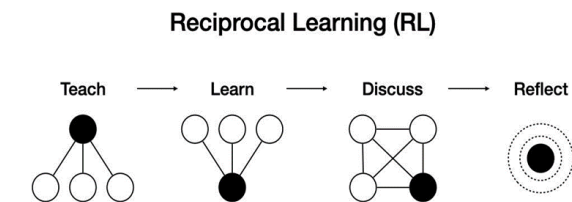
The reciprocal learning framework is divided into distinct stages: teaching what one knows, active listening, group discussions for clarification, and personal reflection. This model works particularly well with complex and ambiguous problems requiring multiple perspectives and provides a structured way to apply learning to participants' contexts. This framework bridges the gap between theory and practical application for instructional designers as they become more aware of their knowledge and gain firsthand insights into other perspectives.

Findings: Collaboration, Self-Awareness, and Structure

The study identified three overarching themes that emerged as participants engaged in reciprocal learning: collaboration, self-awareness, and structure. Participants mentioned the value of the collaborative aspect of reciprocal learning through the semi-structured final interviews and the regular journaling activities. Participants cited the co-creation of ideas across diverse perspectives to help them expand their knowledge and understanding of global course design. During the sessions, collaboration manifested through acknowledging different team members' contributions, showing appreciation for another's opinion or perspective, and maintaining a fluid "back and forth" dynamic.

Self-awareness emerged as instructional designers recognized personal biases and developed reflective practices. During one activity, a participant recognized that as designers, their work should cater to the learners' needs, which may differ significantly from their own. However, they also acknowledged the challenge of shifting from a personal, possibly biased perspective to a more inclusive, learner-centered approach. Another

participant contributed to this discussion by noting the ease of falling into the trap of making assumptions about learners based on one's own experiences, stating, "At the end of the day, it was quite shocking to see what we have been doing without any real analysis, and just assuming many things."

Structure was crucial to the success of the reciprocal learning framework, ensuring smooth transitions between roles and allowing space for reflection and deep engagement. Participants commented on the need to dedicate time to this process and how their work is often challenging in finding time to explore their self-awareness in-depth. One participant stated, "This opportunity is a rare opportunity to engage with like-minded scholars that do not otherwise cross paths." The use of reciprocal learning, although valuable, requires a focused time commitment.

Throughout three reciprocal learning sessions conducted across six weeks, participants reported improved collaboration, self-awareness, and appreciation of diverse perspectives. The sessions focused on active engagement and emphasized reflective practices, critical for developing cultural empathy. One participant described the value of these sessions as improving their practice and helping them feel less isolated while navigating global course design challenges.

Practical Implications for Professional Development

Results from the study indicated that the participants created a strong community with each other, resulting in collaborations beyond the initial objective of the study. They indicated that this was a unique experience and that it was often challenging to identify colleagues that were interested in global course design. Although instructional and learning design is used heavily in the United States, titles vary internationally, often making creating a network of more globally-minded colleagues challenging. Participants identified a need to develop global networks for instructional designers, perhaps through current organizations with sub-groups dedicated to global education. An example of this practice can be found in the "Globalisation-Localistion" Special Interest Group (SIG) within the ICICLE professional organization. Another approach participants offer is through LinkedIn groups that allow professionals to network and collaborate asynchronously.

In addition to the value of a global network, reciprocal learning emerged as a novel approach to current professional development practices for instructional designers. Traditional professional development models often rely on top-down training or "one-and-done" workshops led by experts. In contrast, reciprocal learning offers a more dynamic, collaborative framework that builds on existing instructional design skills such as communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. This approach provides regular opportunities for reflection and self-assessment, moving beyond standard training practices. Incorporating reciprocal learning into professional development not only supports the growth of cultural competency but also empowers instructional designers to create more inclusive and adaptive learning experiences that meet the needs of global learners. Teaching and learning conferences could easily be modified from the traditional lightning talks to the

reciprocal learning model that allows different presenters to share their knowledge and then discuss the deeper connections between the perspectives. The inclusion of dedicated reflective time in ASU conferences is becoming more common, as there is growing recognition of the need for participants to apply their learning to their contexts through reflective practice..

The study findings suggest that reciprocal learning is an effective model for improving cultural competency among instructional designers at ASU and across diverse institutional and professional contexts. This approach can be adapted for:

1. Higher Education Institutions: Universities can integrate reciprocal learning into faculty development programs, instructional design workshops, and international collaboration initiatives. Institutions can better prepare instructional designers and faculty to create inclusive and culturally responsive courses by fostering structured peer-to-peer learning.
2. Corporate Training and Workforce Development: Businesses developing global learning programs can apply reciprocal learning strategies to train employees in cross-cultural communication and inclusive content creation. This model is particularly beneficial for multinational organizations seeking to improve cultural awareness in training programs.
3. EdTech and AI in Education: Organizations designing AI-driven learning solutions can use reciprocal learning among diverse teams to ensure inclusive, culturally responsive content development. This approach can help mitigate biases in AI-generated educational materials and support ethical AI design practices.

As education and workforce development continue to expand in a globalized environment, the need for instructional designers to develop cultural competency is more critical than ever. Embedding structured reflection and peer learning into professional development enables institutions and organizations to cultivate a more inclusive, adaptable, and globally competent workforce.

References

Abuhassna, H., & Alnawajha, S. (2023). Instructional Design Made Easy! Instructional Design Models, Categories, Frameworks, Educational Context, and Recommendations for Future Work. *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education (EJIHPE), 13(4)*, 715–735. https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe13040054

CAST. (2011). Universal design for learning guidelines version 2.0. Retrieved from https://udlguidelines.cast.org/more/downloads

Goodell, J., & Kolodner, J. (2022). Learning Engineering Toolkit: Evidence-Based Practices from the Learning Sciences, Instructional Design, and Beyond (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003276579

Gunawardena, C., Frechette, C. & Layne, L., (2021). Culturally inclusive instructional design: A framework and guide for building online wisdom communities. Routledge.

IBSTPI International Board of Standards for Training, Performance, and Instruction. (2022, December 15). Instructional Design Competencies. https://ibstpi.org/competency-sets-services/instructional-designer-competencies/

Kozai Group. (2009). Intercultural effectiveness scale. St. Louis, MO: Kozai Group.

Quality Matters. (2023). Course Design Rubric Standards. Retrieved from https://www.qualitymatters.org/qa-resources/rubric-standards/higher-ed-rubric

Rogers, P.C., Graham, C. R., & Mayes, C. T. (2007). Cultural Competence and Instructional Design: Exploration Research into the Delivery of Online Instruction Cross-Culturally. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 55(2)*, 197–217.

Saçak, B., Bozkurt, A., & Wagner, E. (2022). Learning Design versus Instructional Design: A Bibliometric Study through Data Visualization Approaches. *Education Sciences, 12(11)*, 752-. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12110752

Tracey, M. W., & Baaki, J. (2022). Empathy and empathic design for meaningful deliverables. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 70(6)*, 2091-2116. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-022-10146-4

Wright, R., Baptiste, D.-L., Booth, A., Addison, H., Abshire, M., Alvarez, D. Barrett, M. Hansen, B., Jenkins, E., Scarborough, S., Wright, E., Davidson, P. M., Ramsey, G. C. (2021). Compelling voices of diversity, equity, and inclusion in prelicensure nursing students: Application of the cultural humility framework. *Nurse Educator, 46(5)*, E90-E94. doi: 10.1097/NNE.0000000000001094
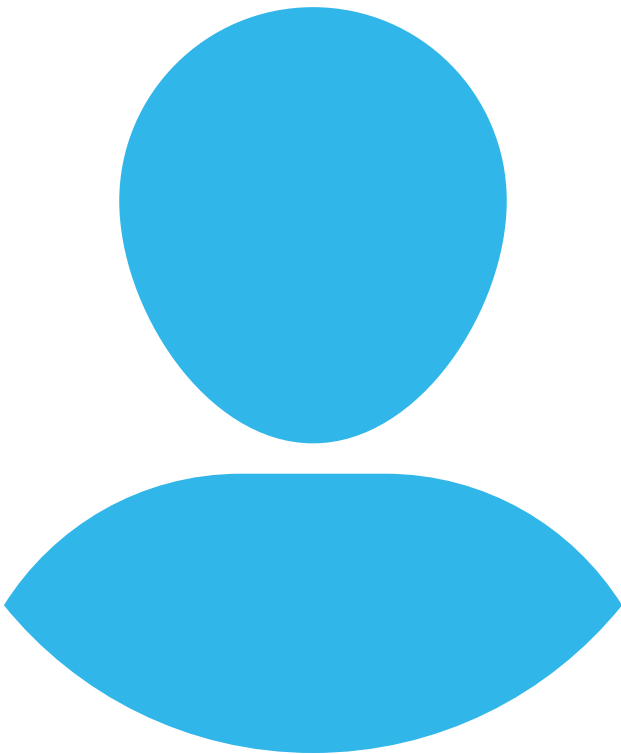
Amy Pate
Arizona State University