

Novice Instructional Design Professionals' Transition to their New Roles: Challenges and Negotiations

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Instructional Design Transition

Novice Instructional Designers

Professional Identity Formation

Novice instructional designers who come from a different disciplinary background often struggle with transitioning into the new role. This study investigates the transition of novice instructional designers as they develop their professional identities, with particular emphasis on the challenges faced and the strategies employed. Through qualitative analysis, four main themes emerged: on-the-job learning, communication barriers, misalignments between personal preferences and professional expectations, and the variability of practices across different professions. The findings offer valuable insights for new and prospective instructional designers, enabling them to align their expectations with industry realities. Additionally, the study presents implications for graduate programs, suggesting enhancements to better prepare students for the evolving job market in instructional design.

The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic forced the hand of online learning to grow exponentially. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2018, at least 16.6% or just over 3.2 million students took online courses (IPEDS, 2020). Although the pandemic is over, more than 4.9 million students, or 26.4%, still took online courses (IPEDS, 2023). As education has been pushed into the next era of learning, teachers, professors, and administrators find they are not adequately equipped, lacking pedagogical knowledge and technological expertise to properly form instruction. Some of these educators, after getting minimal instruction, take on positions as instructional coaches. While skills can be taught, the methodology or why behind the instruction comes from instructional design (ID) programs. With a clear need for instructional designers to facilitate lifelong learning across societies, many people from related backgrounds such as education or designers make a career shift to be instructional design professionals.

This transition as novice instructional designers embark on their new roles is featured with new identity negotiation and formation when they are faced with challenges and misalignments between their initial expectations and the job requirements. With a goal of supporting professional identity formation and negotiation in a graduate academic program, it is imperative to reveal such challenges and misalignments. As such, this study asks the following research questions: what are the major challenges that novice instructional designers face and what are strategic approaches adopted to respond to them?

Methods

Participants

Seven participants, ranging in age, previous work experience, and current work positions across different industries, completed semi-structured individual interviews lasting around one hour. Four participants had worked in K-2 environments as teachers, one as faculty member in higher education institute, and two were professional designers. At the time of interviews, four out of the seven participants were working in higher education settings, one remained in K-12, one in corporate, and one in a government contract job. All had 1-3 years of experience in their current positions.

Data collection and analysis

After obtaining IRB approval, an email was sent to alums from a graduate program in ID outlining the study's purpose. The email stated that interviews would be one hour- one-on-one interviews over Zoom and audio recorded for further analysis. Participants were compensated for their time by receiving a gift card of \$30 (US). Data analysis was conducted by adopting an open coding approach. Written transcriptions were coded between the two independent coders on separate documents, who met on a semi-bi-weekly basis to meet and talk over the analysis of transcriptions. Disagreements were resolved and four major themes emerged during the regular meetings.

Findings

Learning on the job

The first overarching theme for all participants is that their jobs presented tasks which require them to learn new practices and tools. New learning might be a specific content authoring tool, or a variety of client needs from project to project. Accompanying this need to learn on the job was increased mental stress due to a sense of inadequacy. Overall, this theme emphasizes a potential realignment to growth mindset and the ability to be comfortable with not knowing yet but keeping learning.

Communication

Communication is key considering multiple parties are involved in the design and development process. Issues often arise when there is a lack of clarity in the client's needs, and when there is a closed loop for feedback among the ID teams. Also, when there is a large group working on one project, the workflow can be complex.

Besides having an efficient communication practice, getting buy in from instructors or conveying design to clients were two other common cases where communication can be difficult. Our participants emphasized how, in these cases, having a rationale behind design is the key so they could provide theory-supported, evidence-based reasons for specific designs. Also, working on cloud platforms such as Google Docs can help synchronize progress, fasten the feedback loops, and build shared understanding to avoid miscommunication. A related strategy is to show the effect rather than tell.

Misalignment between personal preferences and professional expectations

ID as an interdisciplinary field can entail a wide variety of job responsibilities when it comes to real-world projects. At the same time, some people might be more creative than analytical while others might be the other way around. This gives rise to potential misalignments between personal preferences and professional expectations, as revealed in the following quote: "...how limited I feel in actually designing. So, I was all excited, you know, I'm an artist kind of coming out of class and coming out of the program, I feel like, oh, but I'm not really given much opportunity to paint on a big brush stroke." This challenge calls for constant reflections and negotiations on the job.

Different practices in different professions

Going beyond the daily tasks, as participants made transition to ID from another profession, they also commented on the different practices or norms in the new fields. For example, some participants compared teaching and ID professions, or design and ID professions. Avery, who worked in K-12, pointed out a difference between the public education system and corporate worlds, "...in education, the more degrees you have, the more they have to pay you. Someone does not have a degree, but has a good portfolio, and then I have a degree and a portfolio. It would be cheaper for them if they liked their work to hire them." One way to navigate the different norms is to immerse and enculturate oneself in professional communities.

Discussion

This study explores the transition phase when novice instructional designers negotiated their new professional identities as they embarked on the new fields, focusing on the challenges which faced them and the strategies they adopted to respond. While transitioning to a new professional identity presents itself with challenges, the emergency remote teaching necessitated during the recent pandemic put additional stress on instructional designers who play critical roles in supporting online teaching and learning. For example, instructional designers were forced to be more flexible with getting material and coursework up faster, further leading to issues of quality concerns (Petherbridge, 2023; Rotar, 2021). Also, instructional designers often needed to work with subject matter experts who were unprepared, uneducated in pedagogical knowledge, and forced to cope with technology, posing issues with effective collaboration. All these were corroborated in our study. Nevertheless, negotiating the professional identities during the pandemic, instructional designers took advantage of the heuristics and found ways to diversify learning into hybrid and in-person learning to allow for more accessible environments (Petherbridge, 2023).

Our findings provide a clear guidance for new or prospective instructional designers to align their expectations, and bear implications for graduate programs across the nation who want to support the development of professional identities of their

students to better prepare them for future job market. However, we are limited in the number of participants, and future research can recruit many to examine more perspectives.

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