

Design Justice and Critical Reflection in Instructional Design: A Single-Case Study of Team Development

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This single-case study examines the integration of design justice and critical reflection in an instructional design project involving a diverse team. The research aims to explore how these approaches can foster inclusive and equitable learning experiences. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining surveys, interviews, and observations to gather data from team members. The findings suggest that incorporating design justice principles and critical reflection practices can enhance team collaboration, promote empathy, and improve the quality of instructional designs. Specifically, the study highlights the importance of centering marginalized voices, acknowledging power dynamics, and using inclusive language in design processes. The results also indicate that critical reflection can facilitate a deeper understanding of social and cultural contexts, leading to more effective and culturally responsive instructional designs. This research contributes to the field by providing insights into the application of design justice and critical reflection in instructional design, with implications for promoting equity and inclusivity in education.

Defining the case

An instructional design team at a public, R1 multi-campus university in the Rocky Mountain Region, is responsible for designing and implementing employee educational programs for payroll and benefits administration. Their diverse learning population consisted of more than 25,000 faculty and staff across four university campuses and centralized administration. The team was challenged when, despite the use of ID practices driven by human-centric and universal design, significant barriers existed for populations of learners where race, gender, age, language, and socio-economic factors intersected. Employees were unable to access their benefits information to make timely decisions, due to computer literacy, language, and cultural barriers. This resulted in harm to employees which included: (a) a lack of healthcare for employees and their dependents, (b) loss of retirement benefits, (c) unnamed beneficiaries on life and retirement plans, (d) loss of tuition assistance, and (e) lack of access to retirement and healthcare savings. The leader of the team began to address these barriers by examining personal and institutional design assumptions that were occurring within design practice (Lowe, 2023). This led to a team development approach that would encourage them to shift exclusive design practices to inclusive ones.

Methods

This study used qualitative methods to explore how the lived experience of one instructional design team's social justice work in their design practice halted the perpetuation of harmful design outcomes. A major goal of this single-case study was to capture the team's lived experience as they: (a) were introduced to the framework of design justice and individual and team critical reflection, (b) developed and implemented a transformative needs assessment (TNA) with marginalized learners, and (c) incorporated the voices of their learners into their design process (Lowe, 2024; Constanza-Chock 2020; Van Manen, 2016).

The participants in the study were the members of one instructional design team consisting of: (a) the program manager: responsible for the design, management, implementation, and evaluation of the employee educational program, including the development and leadership of the ID team, (b) two full-time professionals: responsible for executing the total rewards employee educational program, and (c) one part-time professional: a benefit plan subject matter expert responsible for delivering presentations and translated materials. This case offers observations within the context that the intervention occurred (Baxter, 2008; Yin, 2018). The study was framed by three research questions:

- (R1) How do the principles of design justice help an instructional designer shift from designing "for" marginalized learners to designing "with" them in the design process?
- (R2) How does the development and implementation of a TNA impact an instructional design team's ability to assess learner-actual needs versus perceived needs?
- (R3) How do the instructional design team and their ID process benefit from and were challenged by the TNA?

Qualitative data was collected from individual reflection forms, transcripts of team discussions, and individual pre/post open-ended surveys. Data was collected and analyzed over six months. The data selection strategies achieved three goals: (a) data was collected from multiple sources to ensure data credibility, (b) the multiple data sources were triangulated, and (c) findings were supported through the convergence of the evidence (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2018).

The research questions and corresponding theoretical propositions guided the data analysis (Yin, 2018). In Vivo codes were created by using the participants' actual words or phrases. The three research questions were used to structure the coding process. Phrases were coded that evidenced: (a) a shift in designer thinking (RQ1), (b) learner-actual needs (RQ2), (c) the impact of the TNA, either benefits or challenges (RQ3), and (d) quotes matching the three research question topics. Once all the In Vivo codes were collected, they were analyzed and arranged into categories, sub-categories, and themes (see Table 1).

Findings

Proposition one stated that the team would begin to shift to designing "with" their marginalized learners. Three prominent themes emerged concerning research question one evidencing a progression of the shift: (a) designer self-awareness and change agency, (b) new design approaches, and (c) individual and team advocacy. Proposition two stated the team would begin to better ascertain learner-actual needs as they were led through the development and implementation of a TNA. Two themes emerged: (a) innovative approaches to data gathering which included observation, record, and discussion of learner behavior and expression in the learning environment, and (b) the incorporation of learner actual needs into the team's iterative design practices. Proposition three assumed the team would experience both benefits and challenges throughout the development and implementation of the TNA. The team expressed six significant benefits and two challenges from their experience.

Table 1

Presuppositions, Themes, and In Vivo Code Examples

Research Question	Theme	In Vivo Code Examples
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P1: The ID team will begin to shift to designing "with" marginalized learners.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • designer self-awareness and change agency (31) • new design approaches (29) • individual and team advocacy (10) 	<p>"I learned an assumption"</p> <p>"...better learn your audience so that you can tailor your presentation."</p> <p>"What I can give to this is voice."</p> <p>"My role is also to listen and advocate for the employees."</p>
P2: The ID team will begin to ascertain learner actual needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • innovative approaches to gathering data (learner actual needs) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ instructor observation of learner behaviors (63) ◦ instructor observation of learner statements/questions (34) • incorporation of learner actual needs into iterative design practice (30) 	<p>"He didn't have his login"</p> <p>"(they) asked for resources."</p> <p>"ask questions in the moment."</p> <p>"adapt the content as I learn more about the learner, constantly improving to better meet their needs."</p>
P3: The ID team will experience benefits and challenges from the development and implementation of the transformative needs assessment in their design process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • benefits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lasting impact • immediate and transferable application • relational focus • safe space • changes mindset and team culture • challenges were a benefit • challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • resources, funding, and support to meet the needs • establishing trust relationships 	<p>"I was immediately responsive to what I'm observing."</p> <p>"What we want to bring to the needs assessment discussions is that building relationships is very much a big part of what needs to happen."</p> <p>"It's created a safe space for us as a team to both challenge ourselves and each other with our assumptions."</p> <p>"I came like a common practice for us."</p> <p>"I think a challenge is the lack of resources to support them."</p> <p>"...not being about to meet the actual needs discovered."</p> <p>"I think that a challenge is how do we break down the power dynamics."</p>

To illustrate a designer's self-awareness and change agency consider this designer's willingness to identify and challenge their existing assumptions after a new hire benefits session where it was observed that a large number of employees were first time medical plan participants:

I learned an assumption that I was unaware I had. I assumed that they (our learners) would come with basic (health) insurance knowledge. This challenged my assumption about them because I assumed that they may have had health insurance before or knew a little bit about how it worked. It was a good reminder that this could be the first time or the first time in a long time that some of our employees have the opportunity to access health insurance.

This observation and discussion caused the team to reapproach their learning design by centering need of some learners to not only learn how to enroll in their benefits, but how to make more informed decisions by including time for topics related to better understanding medical health plans.

Individual and team advocacy emerged from the gathering of observations and behaviors in session. For example, designers began to take note of the number of individuals that took our printed resources home with them. One participant stated in broken English, “This all I need?” as they gathered the paper resources. These observations informed our team about the importance of giving our limited English proficient employees resources to take home with them. This led to advocacy work for budget to print resources in our department that promotes paperless resources as an efficiency, for these employee groups and a redesign of the electronic PDFs to be accessible as print materials.

Discussion

When learners are excluded from information due to barriers created by the designers or systems responsible for the programs and resources, injustices occur. For instructional designers, in positions where their advocacy and ability to promote change is attainable, action is key. The findings of this case support the reality that one team of instructional designers embedded in a public institution of higher education took small daily steps to move diversity, equity, and inclusion mission statements into action. Their story is an example of how in their role as instructional designers they evidence the cultivation of an equity mindset. This allowed them to be positioned as both change agents and advocates for marginalized learners.

This team’s lived experience lays a foundation for other instructional designers and researchers seeking to incorporate social justice into their design practice. Both the principles of design justice and critical reflection served as a catalyst to better inform this team about their design practice. They propelled the team to transform their needs assessment and move from unintentional, exclusive design practices to the awareness of the need and the ability to move to inclusive design practices. This work is applicable to ID teams, regardless of context, that service diverse learning populations by strengthening individual designer’s ability to self-reflect and adapt their design practices to meet the needs of learners with needs that are different than their own.

Moving Forward

This case detailed one ID team’s effort to take action to correct injustices occurring within a large system because of their design practice. Though correcting all the injustices within a large system may seem overwhelming and requires the work of many, instructional designers do fill a role with an impactful power dynamic. The findings of this case support the reality that individuals can take small daily steps to move toward equity. In addition, ID teams can cultivate an equity mindset allowing them to be positioned as both change agents and advocates for marginalized learners. I offer three major takeaways: (a) make equity work a priority in instructional design; (b) consider the principles of design justice, coupled with individual and team reflection to cultivate a team equity culture; and (c) prioritize and transform ID needs assessment work.

Future research on how the principles of design justice coupled with individual and team reflection impacts the development of equity work with different ID teams in various contexts is needed to advance equity work in instructional design. It also provokes questions about instructional designer’s view of their role in change agency and equity advocacy. Asking more questions could propel learning design forward to develop the art of centering the voices of marginalized learners.

This team’s lived experience serves as an example to other instructional designers seeking to incorporate social justice into their design practice. This study captured the initial work of this team’s growth. The team’s commitment to “not go back” propels them forward as they continue to develop the art of centering the voices of their marginalized learners, develop

strategies to better identify the needs of other underserved employee populations, and continue to take actionable steps towards equitable change.

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