Bridging Institutional Roles: Lived Experiences and Institutional Challenges of Faculty-Instructional Designers

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In higher education, instructional design has shifted from content-focused approaches towards learner-and experience-centered practices that place an emphasis on high-quality learning experiences and student engagement (Drysdale, 2021; Xie et al., 2020). Faculty who serve as instructional designers (faculty-IDs) occupy a hybrid role that blends academic and design expertise, but face challenges such as workload balance, evolving technological and pedagogical demands, unclear institutional integration, and role ambiguity (Pollard & Kumar, 2022; Stefaniak, 2021). Using practice-based scholarship (PBS) and collaborative autoethnography (CAE), this study examines the lived experiences of two faculty-IDs and one administrator in a newly formed instructional design team within a College of Education. Data from individual reflections and group discussions illuminated structural, relational, and personal dimensions of the faculty-ID role. Our findings highlight the opportunities and potential for mentorship, identity development, and strategic advocacy in addition to persistent issues with role definition, boundary negotiation and responsibility creep. During the

establishment of the new instructional design unit and mobilizing the novel faculty-designer roles, the authors discuss how institutional factors and challenges shaped their daily work, professional identities and collaborative experiences. These experiences highlight the importance of cooperative reflection and mentoring as stabilizing strategies in hybrid jobs. Strategies for defining faculty-ID roles, promoting sustainable workflows, and utilizing practice-based scholarship (PBS) to drive organizational learning and instructional design are among the implications for practice.

Introduction

The role of instructional designers (IDs) in higher education (HE) has evolved from a content-focused to a learner- and experience-centric approach, particularly as institutions prioritize high-quality online education and student engagement (Xie et al., 2020). Traditionally, in HE, IDs collaborate with faculty to integrate pedagogical and technological expertise with subject matter knowledge (Drysdale, 2021). However, faculty who also serve as instructional designers, faculty-IDs, represent a unique hybrid role that blends academic and design responsibilities.

Faculty-IDs must navigate the competing demands of teaching, research, and instructional design, making workload balance a persistent challenge (Pollard & Kumar, 2022). Staying current with technological and pedagogical advancements adds another layer of complexity, increasing the risk of burnout. Additionally, faculty-IDs often struggle with institutional recognition, as their contributions do not fit neatly into traditional academic reward structures. Unlike research faculty or full-time instructional designers, they may face role ambiguity, unclear evaluation criteria, and limited institutional support (Stefaniak, 2021). Navigating faculty relationships can also be difficult, as some peers may perceive instructional design as secondary to disciplinary expertise. This dual role requires faculty-IDs to manage relationships diplomatically while advocating for pedagogical innovation (Mueller et al., 2022).

Despite these challenges, faculty-IDs are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between instructional design theory and practice. Their dual expertise allows them to foster deeper collaboration with faculty and drive curricular innovation by being embedded within academic departments (Mao et al., 2023; Richardson et al., 2018). Additionally, they play a critical role in faculty development, aligning instructional design principles with the realities of teaching to create actionable and sustainable pedagogical improvements (Bowers et al., 2022). Moreover, faculty-IDs contribute to advancing practice-based scholarship by reflecting on their experiences, documenting challenges, and sharing solutions. This study contributes practice-based insight into how faculty-instructional designer roles are enacted, negotiated, and stabilized within institutional contexts. By foregrounding lived experience through collaborative autoethnography, the paper illustrates how hybrid professionals navigate ambiguity, boundary-setting, and identity work during the formation of a new instructional design unit.

This paper explores the lived experiences of two faculty members and one administrator working on a newly formed Instructional Design team within an Instructional Technology department, as a form of PBS through collaborative ethnography. In this paper, we present the design team's lived experiences through narratives and examine our professional roles, ID experience, and trajectories in relation to the establishment of a new instructional design unit within a College of Education. Here, we illuminate both the opportunities and challenges of occupying the faculty-designer dual identity. The experiences of

an emerging professional, a seasoned instructional designer, and the administrator overseeing this new unit will help examine how we experience, navigate, and define the hybrid role of faculty-IDs in our college context.

Framework

Faculty-ID hybrid and role ambiguity

Faculty-ID positions occupy a unique intersection in higher education that blends pedagogical and faculty support expertise. This hybrid role can enable deeper collaboration with faculty and provide a bridge between theory and practice (Mao et al., 2023; Richardson et al., 2018). However, because the role spans two traditionally distinct professional domains, it can sometimes lack clearly defined institutional frameworks (Pollard & Kumar, 2022). Without explicit or formalized positions, faculty IDs can experience role ambiguity, leading to inconsistent responsibilities and expectations (Bowers et al., 2022). We summarize the conceptualizations, challenges, and opportunities of this hybrid role in Table 1.

Table 1

Conceptual Dimensions of the Faculty-ID Role in Higher Education

Dimension	Description	Challenges	Opportunities
Hybrid Professional Identity	Faculty-IDs blend pedagogical experience, field-specific knowledge, with ID and faculty support functions	Lack of clearly defined institutional frameworks, inconsistent role recognition	Acts as a bridge between theory and practice, facilitating deeper collaborations with faculty
Role Ambiguity & Responsibility Creep	Duties often expand beyond the original scope, may include administrative, technical, and support tasks	Diffusion of focus from core ID responsibilities (may overlap with technical troubleshooting)	Collaboration and exposure to broader institutional networks
Balancing Teaching and ID Work	Dual responsibility for one's own teaching and supporting the courses of other faculty	Tensions when workload/evaluation and scheduling systems do not reflect both roles; high energy and drive are required for switching back and forth between roles	Intersection and cross-pollination of scholarly and design work between pedagogy and design (e.g., Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL))
Institutional Culture and Engagement	Department, college, and institution-wide culture and goals shape faculty-ID roles and responsibilities	Uneven engagement across units; ID may be undervalued or misunderstood, perceived as inaccessible	Opportunity to reform, restructure, and influence curricular innovation if collaboration allows.
Strategic Positioning for Innovation	The faculty-ID role provides key insight into instruction within institutional contexts	Risk of burnout if workload balances are unaddressed	Potential to advance learner-centered instruction and technology-enhanced learning experiences

Role ambiguity often manifests as "responsibility creep," where faculty-IDs are tasked with diverse duties beyond their original scope, sometimes at the expense of their core instructional design work (Clark-Stallkamp, 2025). The hybrid position also requires balancing time and creative energy between designing and facilitating learning experiences for one's own students and supporting other instructors' course development needs. This constant negotiation between teaching and design work can generate tensions, particularly when institution workload policies or even evaluation systems do not fully account for both sets of responsibilities (Stefaniak, 2021). In all the tales, responsibility creep was described as both an individual workload problem and a structural risk that could lead to long-term fatigue and job dilution if left unchecked. Instead of using formal institutional processes, participants recounted using informal labor, boundary stretching, and personal negotiation to address ambiguous expectations.

Institutional culture plays a critical role in shaping the faculty-ID experience. In colleges where instructional design is not embedded as a strategic, college-wide initiative, use of faculty-IDs can be uneven, with some departments engaging deeply while others remain disengaged (Drysdale, 2021). These disparities can exacerbate feelings of marginalization and underutilization, especially when faculty-IDs must advocate for their role's value within academic units that do not fully understand or prioritize instructional design (Mueller et al., 2022).

Despite these challenges, faculty-IDs' embeddedness in the academic environment positions them to influence curricular innovation and faculty development in ways that external instructional design staff may not (Xie & Rice, 2021). Their dual perspective allows them to understand the lived realities of teaching in their department and college while applying design principles to enhance learning. However, to fully realize this potential, institutions must be aware of structural issues regarding role clarity, workload balance, and recognition to prevent burnout and maximize the effectiveness of faculty-IDs in advancing student-centered, high-quality learning experiences (Bowers et al., 2022; Pollard & Kumar, 2022).

PBS and Reflective Professional Inquiry

Boyer's (1990) Scholarship Reconsidered expanded the scope of academic work to include the scholarship of application, emphasizing the value of applying disciplinary knowledge to address meaningful problems in context. This framing positions practice as an essential site of scholarly contribution, where theory is iteratively applied, evaluated, and refined in response to real-world challenges. Practice-based scholarship (PBS) builds directly on this view, treating professional work as a source of knowledge generation when documenting, analyzing, and sharing it.

For faculty-IDs, PBS is a natural extension of their hybrid role. Faculty-IDs inhabit a space that melds teaching, instructional design, and capacity building, requiring them to translate research and theory into practical solutions (Bowers et al., 2022; Richardson et al., 2018). In doing so, they can contribute to learning experiences and generate transferable insights that can inform the broader field, specifically in this gap where faculty-IDs are not well studied.

PBS also resonates with methodological approaches such as collaborative autoethnography, which center reflective practice and professional storytelling as legitimate forms of scholarly output (Change et al., 2013; Clark-Stallkamp, 2025). Recent scholarship in educational technology underscores that such approaches can convey tacit knowledge, highlight context-specific decision-making, and document innovations and adaptations that may otherwise go undocumented (Bowers et al., 2022; Drysdale, 2021). By integrating multiple practitioner perspectives, PBS moves beyond individual reflection to social and organizational analysis of practice that is both situation and generalizable (Keevers & Treleaven, 2011).

Autoethnography and Collaborative Reflection

Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is particularly well-suited for exploring lived experiences. CAE integrates systematic self-reflection and collaborative meaning-making, enabling multiple voices to provide insight on shared and divergent experiences within the same institutional context (Change et al., 2013). Using CAE also helps address gaps in the literature by capturing common dynamics in all their complexity. This process of individual narrative and group discussion provides the structure to

help capture these insights. Indeed, the collaborative nature of CAE mirrors the work of instructional designers themselves, who operate in relationship-rich, context-dependent environments (Mueller et al., 2022). By engaging in collective analysis, we model the very principles, shared experience, negotiated meaning, and iterative improvement that underpin effective instructional design practice in higher education.

Additionally, CAE functions as a form of practice-based scholarship. By documenting and analyzing our own professional experiences, we contribute not only to the scholarly understanding of faculty-ID roles but also to practical knowledge that can inform institutional policy, faculty development, and the design of instructional support structures. As both Bowers et al. (2022) and Clark-Stallkamp (2025) have demonstrated, reflexive, narrative-driven research can connect reflective practice with actionable change in higher education contexts.

Methodology

This study uses Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE) to examine the lived experience of faculty-IDs and an administrator during the formation of a new instructional design unit in a College of Education. This team consists of an emerging professional in her first year out of graduate school, a seasoned faculty member with prior instructional design, administrative, and faculty experience within instructional design, and an assistant dean overseeing the unit. These varied perspectives allow us to examine how hybrid academic roles are defined, negotiated, and enacted in practice.

CAE was specifically selected because it positions the researchers as both subjects and the analysts, enabling us to explore our experiences from an insider perspective. This approach is particularly valuable for studying faculty-IDs, whose professional realities are not well documented in first-person, practice-based accounts (Bowers et al., 2022; Stefaniak, 2025). Unlike traditional qualitative methods that rely on external observation or interviews, CAE integrates self-reflection with collaborative meaning-making, allowing each author to contribute an authentic voice while also co-constructing thematic insights (Chang et al., 2013, as cited in Bowers et al., 2022).

Our use of CAE is grounded in the recognition that the faculty-ID role is complex and often ambiguous. Faculty-IDs must navigate competing demands, unclear role boundaries, and shifting institutional priorities (Pollard & Kumar, 2022). CAE's iterative cycles of individual writing, group dialogue, and thematic analysis provide the structure to examine these dynamics while maintaining the depth of personal narratives. This process aligns with Richardson et al.'s (2018) call for research that goes beyond perspective guidance to document how academic professionals actually navigate their work in context, as well as Clark-Stallkamp's (2025) reflections on the rarely linear or formulaic work of instructional designers. Through this work, we aim to (1) examine the lived experiences of faculty-IDs and an administrator (2) explore how hybrid academic roles are defined, negotiated, and enacted in practice from the perspectives of the faculty-IDs and administrator, (3) document the complexities, ambiguities, and contextual challenges of faculty-ID roles through individual writing, reflection, and thematic analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected using an iterative process consistent with CAE. Our approach to CAE aligns with Clark-Stallkamp's (2025) premise that narrative autoethnographic methods capture how ID is situated within organizational structures and hierarchies, while giving voice to the individual negotiation, tussle, and deliberations within the lived experience of the instructional designer. CAE extends this individual reflection into a dialogic process, enabling multiple voices to interact, affirm, and dissect the common context. This collective analysis aims to reveal patterns and contradictions not visible from a single perspective. This is important for our study, as the hybrid-faculty role is not only under-documented but also highly variable across institutions and contexts.

Each author began by writing an individual narrative as a personal reflection on the process of designing and enacting these new faculty-ID roles within our College of Education. These reflections captured how we approached the role design, our lived

experiences during the first year, and the challenges and opportunities we identified along the way. While this shared understanding guided the structure for these narratives, the emphasis was on documenting authentic experiences, allowing each author to complete their reflection independently.

We shared these narratives in a common document, allowing each participant to read and reflect on what the others had written. Then we had a group discussion where we elaborated on resonances and differences in our experiences, clarified moments of ambiguity, and examined emerging themes. This, in combination with our team meetings, which served as a method for on-the-fly negotiation and iteration, helped to provide a further layer of analysis, as many of the challenges discussed have been discussion points throughout the year.

Positionality

Our research team brings diverse identities and professional roles to this study: an Indo-Caribbean woman with an early-stage career in higher education and STEM background, a Latina with over 15 years of experience in higher education, and a white male who has eight years of experience as a faculty member and three as an academic leader. These intersecting racial, ethnic, gender, and leadership perspectives shape how we experience, interpret, and navigate our work as faculty-IDs and leaders in a College of Education. We acknowledge that these perspectives are situated and partial, influenced by factors such as institutional visibility, perceived authority, and access to resources.

Because CAE relies on self-reflection and co-construction of meaning, we engaged in intentional dialogue about how our positionalities and power dynamics, both within our team and the institution, might influence our narratives and interpretations. For example, the faculty-IDs' experiences may be informed by navigating marginalization in academic hierarchies, while the administrator's perspective reflects the constraints and responsibilities of leadership. We aimed to approach these differences as strengths, adding to our analysis while maintaining mutual respect and accountability.

To ensure privacy at our institution, we reference individuals, programs, and specific incidents broadly. We also sought each other's consent before including sensitive subjects in our shared reflections, ensuring accuracy and fidelity to each voice. By grounding our positionalities, we present our findings as situated knowledge, rooted in who we are, where we work, and how we understand our roles, while upholding ethical standards for trustworthiness in PBS.

Thematic Narrative

Within the College of Education, the largest academic unit on our campus, serving more than 6,400 students, the hybrid faculty-ID role was established to provide embedded, college-wide instructional support. As 12-month clinical faculty teaching a 2/2/1 load, we balance instructional responsibilities with design and development work that directly serves programs across the college. In our instructional design capacity, we develop and deliver training on campus technologies, the learning management system, and evidence-based pedagogical practices; conduct needs assessments; collaborate one-on-one with faculty to design and develop courses; and facilitate peer reviews to support instructional quality. To sustain this work, we meet twice monthly as an instructional design team to discuss projects, share updates, and coordinate efforts. We also meet regularly as a full unit with our administrator, an assistant dean, and the department chair, who provides strategic leadership and supports the continued development of the role. This embedded model positions faculty-IDs as both educators and designers, uniquely situated to bridge pedagogical innovation, faculty support, and institutional priorities within a rapidly expanding college. The following are narrative descriptions from each of the three members of this new unit.

The Emerging Professional

I resonate very well with the perspective of David Merrill, who speaks eloquently about being designers by assignment, or, as my former colleague would say, accidental designers. From a very young age, technology is something I gravitated towards, and my background in geospatial technology and Geography encouraged me to think about problem-solving, even more so in

the context of being in a small island developing state – how do we solve problems with limited resources, and in a way that is authentic to our purpose? My journey into ID was entirely accidental. I recall being in high school while working alongside my dad, a K-12 principal who bounced ideas off of me while writing research papers for his education degree – Piaget, Vygotsky, Chomsky; strange words to me that sounded so unlike the Caribbean names. Eventually, my master's thesis sought to intersect education with technology – answering the broad question – how exactly can we design with geospatial tools in specific settings to engage students and help them learn? This interest intersected with my formative career experiences in business and banking. Here, I not only got to reside in a "playground" of technology, but also to use it in a way that placed the client's needs at the focus, while implementing procedures and then evaluating the quality of our work.

I was then admitted to an R1 University in the Midwestern United States, and I thought that my program focused on innovative technology. Instead, my experiences here were guided by my mentors, who placed learner needs above technology use, using it intentionally and only as needed. I learnt what an instructional designer was, in theory – in the classroom, eking out a 200-page design document that mirrored Dick and Carey's model, and practically – being part of a team of graduate students, mentored by both higher ed and K-12 professionals on creating federally funded multimedia resources for teachers to transition to online teaching during the pandemic. I observed that there is a sense of rigor, care and intentionality in ID work, and this is something I mirrored in my own ID identity as I focused on mentoring preservice teachers and graduate students.

At the end of my studies, I knew I wanted to be in a space where teaching was valued and students were the focus, because I believed that excellent teaching deserves just as much (perhaps even more) celebration and recognition as grant funding and publishing. It is with this goal of keeping the students at the heart and the focus that I began my present hybrid role as a faculty-instructional-designer (IDer); this was my early perception of the institution, of one that cares for the students, and to quote one of my colleagues, "the place you go when you want to become a teacher."

Initially, I felt very prepared for the faculty teaching portion of my job at the present College of Education, as my experiences in K-12 and higher education prepared me to meet the expectations of my current institution as a graduate online instructor who is responsive to the needs of career-driven adult learners. I derive a strong sense of purpose from this portion of my hybrid role, and it helps shape the research and design work I want to produce, as I focus explicitly on teaching novice designers to bridge the theory-practice gap by working as instructional designers for their own clients. The blurring of my role comes into play as I prepare my learners for their future roles as technology coaches and offer specific ID feedback through real-world, iterative instructional design, with a particular focus on the ADDIE model. The best part of my semester is when I read student reflections, and for them, it "clicks," and they have an "ah ha!" moment in which they describe the front-end portion of instructional design, focusing on analysis and design before jumping into creating content.

For the instructional design portion of my job, I thought I'd just begin creating materials from the get-go – like the projects I worked on in graduate school. However, since we were newly established, we had a lot of legwork to do and had to onboard our future clients before I got around to creating content. There were some colleagues who knew exactly what an IDer was, and some who had no idea what they could expect from us. Interestingly, the ones who knew exactly what we could do, I believe, have some reluctance to let go of the reins. This is to be expected – trust is earned after all, and faculty do think of their courses as akin to their charges, and many faculty have been wearing so many different hats, stepping into the role of an IDer at times. Hence, for many early projects, I felt like I was giving high-level opinions or feedback, but I didn't work collaboratively and didn't have much agency to create or step in to work as I usually would. This later shifted, and I developed really good rapport and trust with other faculty members who would encourage my creativity and were passionate about improving learning experiences for their students.

There are also some tensions in which there is a lack of collegial understanding in what an ID-faculty means. Initially, I felt like a chameleon, but a badly disguised one that sits in a spotlight; I adapt and respond to the specific threads of commonality but also noting marked differences between us and other roles; "writing papers and presenting at conferences is important, but your job doesn't depend on this, and it isn't expected of you for promotion/tenure - you're so lucky!" I find myself wishing that my colleagues would see that ID work is rigorous, and that I am more like them than they realize, as we focus on research that

aims to improve learner outcomes, drawing on SoTL, theory, and practice. I also hope that more people can understand what instructional design actually is, recognize the depth of the field, and that we can perhaps deepen the scope beyond the surface-level technology consultations, such as operating tool interfaces. Navigating these tensions and expectations left me with a sense that I wasn't doing enough ID work, and I frequently hashed out these feelings and paths with my fellow IDer and administrator, who were able to help me break things into chunks, focus on the bigger picture, and navigate the way forward as the new roles become more consolidated.

I reflect on the many cases in the ID casebook given to me by one of my mentors – and think to myself, my life does look like these cases at times; sometimes there isn't a clearly defined need, other times you need to step in, create the work and pull from your own research and understanding, give the client something to work with, before you actually arrive at the discrete tasks you need to accomplish. Often, you are asked to review a course, but the client actually means to help them create one, and you need to learn to manage shifting requests and expectations – a course review takes several weeks, and design can easily take a few months. A senior colleague asked me, "So, which is it that you want to be? An instructional designer or a professor?" echoed by another colleague, "So, what's the end goal?" I think having agency and creative freedom is a great thing, and I'm okay with creating spaces and a new role alongside my well-seasoned ID colleague and administrator, who takes a vested interest not only in our role but in its potential. I remain optimistic and enjoy the tangible, observable impacts of design work on students' learning experiences. I believe that, with time, I will also learn to articulate (no pun intended) the less visible aspects of the faculty-designer hybrid role.

The Seasoned-ID

My path to the hybrid faculty-instructional designer role has been nonlinear but consistent in one regard: I've always operated in the spaces between. Before arriving at my current institution, I served as the Course Delivery Manager for an online MBA program. In that role, I was responsible for everything from course development and instructional design to faculty onboarding and student support infrastructure. The responsibilities aligned well with the work of both an instructional designer and technologist, with some project management sprinkled on top. I collaborated with faculty on course design and redesign, ensuring alignment with accreditation standards; managed content delivery across terms; and troubleshot pedagogical and technical gaps while working with the Learning management system and various learning technology integrations.

Prior to that, I held a tenure-track position as an assistant professor and instructional design librarian. There, I juggled teaching graduate students in instructional technology, designing library instruction for a diverse campus community, and supporting faculty in course transformation efforts. Primarily, I served as a conduit for expanding library offerings virtually for students by creating instructional videos and a First-Year Experience microcourse. It was an environment that encouraged scholarly inquiry and innovation, yet one where my hybrid identity, as both faculty and designer, was often misunderstood or flattened into traditional library silos.

Upon arriving in my current role within a College of Education, I expected my prior experiences, both in an administrative role and as a faculty member, to provide a strong foundation for contributing to this new, more formalized instructional design unit. In many ways, they have. I feel equipped to engage faculty in critical conversations about pedagogy, assessment, and course design. But the reality is that the role was not as clearly defined from the outset. Instead of stepping into an established set of responsibilities, we have been in a period of constant negotiation and iteration, shaping and reshaping the contour of the work while trying to meet the emerging needs of the faculty, programs, and administration.

This ambiguity has brought with it a kind of responsibility creep that can be both energizing and exhausting. A phrase that fills me with slight fear is: "Oh, the IDs can do that." Without formal parameters, one can be called upon for everything from high-level curriculum mapping to tech troubleshooting, from leading faculty development initiatives to establishing branding for the unit, to constant code-switching from being the professor to mentoring the professor, and the dreaded job description "other duties as assigned." The range has kept my skills sharp, but it has also blurred the lines sometimes between strategic work and reactive work, making it difficult to prioritize the kind of deep, creative design that requires uninterrupted space and focus.

This is one of the unexpected tensions in this divided role. On the one hand, I teach graduate students, guiding them through complex, multi-phase creative projects that demand sustained attention, feedback, and mentorship. On the other hand, I'm expected to produce creative outputs (course redesigns, instructional materials, media assets) for faculty across the college. Each requires a different mode of thinking, and shifting rapidly between the two can leave little time to recharge or generate new ideas.

In addition, the absence of a college-wide mandate or formula or credit for integrating instructional design feedback/assistance has further complicated the establishment of this new unit. Without an explicit expectation from leadership that departments engage with instructional designers, usage of our services has been uneven. Some departments seem to see the value immediately and collaborate often; others rarely reach out, leaving our impact patchy and our visibility inconsistent. In effect, the role's reach depends as much on departmental culture as our own outreach and expertise. To this last point, we have worked hard to increase visibility by conducting a road show, meeting with all departments during their meetings, setting up a welcome table for new faculty, establishing a central hub website with services, and providing the dean's office with a report on our first year's work. Next year, we will have some outputs to share created in Articulate, which may stimulate additional interest in our development services, as "flashy" uses of technology often have more visibility than the behind-the-scenes design work, such as scaffolding and the development of learning objectives.

Another ambiguous element to the position was the lack of a clear promotion path for clinical faculty, which we are, and thus, no defined path for our unique positions either. Over the past year, faculty governance worked to create this plan, which was approved in the spring. During these discussions, it was clear that our roles were not considered in the overall plan whatsoever. In a town hall discussion, I asked about this and was given a very blanket statement in return that our jobs just fit "into teaching." This is true to some extent, but it overlooks the intricacies of the instructional design role (e.g., does report writing go in teaching or service?). While this was frustrating, it was encouraging to work with our administrator to define our unique job breakdown through discussion and to figure out how we might achieve the same goals as our traditional clinical counterparts. This is one of the benefits of having an administrator who knows instructional design as a field. In previous positions, I was in a one-off situation and could therefore just define my own set of rules within the system for the most part, but my administrators rarely knew our field or the intricacies. It is a great benefit to have someone in charge of instructional design who is also rooted in that field.

Amid these various complexities, I have stepped into an informal mentoring role with a more junior designer. Supporting her has been a grounding part of my work, helping her navigate not only the technical and pedagogical aspects but, more importantly, the unspoken cultural codes of working with other faculty in academia. Guiding her has forced me to articulate my own strategies for working in ambiguity and to model the professional resilience that hybrid roles often demand. I am fortunate to have had experiences in previous roles that helped me develop the strategies and identities I can now pass on.

These overlapping experiences, negotiating an undefined role, managing creeping responsibilities, balancing creative demands, working without a structural mandate, and mentoring a colleague, have sharpened my awareness of how institutional context shapes the lived reality of hybrid professionals. It is not just what we do, but about how the structures (or lack of structures) around us enable or constrain that work. In the end, inhabiting a newly designed hybrid role often means living in a state of iterative design, of my courses, of collaborations, and of the role itself.

The Administrator

One of the first moments that I remember as a faculty member was sitting through a workshop at new faculty orientation delivered by a faculty member from a discipline outside of education. In this session, they essentially shared minor aspects of instructional design as if they had just stumbled upon them. They were unaware of our field of instructional design and technology. I remember going up to the presenter after the session to tell them, "This is what I am trained in; there's a whole field of research and practice devoted to this," and received little enthusiasm from that presenter. That moment stuck with me as I progressed through my academic career, both as a faculty member and an academic leader. I feel somewhat driven by the

reality of what we do (and can do) as trained instructional designers, and by how often it is overlooked by colleagues who are "good instructors." This perspective is not meant to devalue the instructional design skills of others, including faculty outside our area or the field of education, but rather counters those who believe they understand the process and know best without being familiar with the research behind learning and instructional design.

As an academic leader, I took over a unit experiencing unprecedented year-over-year growth, a 180% increase in enrollment over 5 years with no additional full-time support. Additionally, the department I was leading was not the only one within our college experiencing this level of growth, with a similar lack of resources (please note that resources eventually arrived, as evidenced by these positions and many others). The solution to addressing these growth challenges was typically to have faculty teach overloads or hire part-time instructors to cover courses. For context, our college has long been recognized for its instructional excellence, with system-level instructors of the year sporadically spread throughout the faculty. Through this growth, faculty in my department (and others, to be fair) were being called on to use their instructional design skills beyond designing and teaching their courses. Looking across the university, there were other examples of in-house instructional designers supporting faculty's instructional excellence in other academic units.

All these factors shaped the context for what I wanted to set out to do. I advocated that, in lieu of hiring an instructional designer, we hire hybrid faculty who could teach in programs within my department 50% of the time and serve as instructional designers for the college for the remainder of their time. This solution was wholeheartedly embraced by our college and university, and we were fortunate to hire my two co-authors into those roles.

With the addition of these positions, the primary goal was to create a unit within the college that could best support our faculty's needs. The instructional designers were poised to be a strong support as enrollment continued to expand, helping ensure quality across courses in the college. While that is the chief goal, the establishment of this unit was not without lofty ambitions. First, this unit could be a great opportunity for experiential, real-world projects for students in related degree programs, particularly in instructional technology programs. We saw this as a great starting point for creating tracks specifically for those interested in instructional design outside a K12 perspective, a track we had been informally supporting students in through minor program modifications in years past. Additionally, I wanted to explore the idea of providing instructional design services to local organizations experiencing performance problems; these problems could be addressed by a collaborative group of students, faculty, and instructional designers.

We are now entering year two of this initiative, and while I feel it has been successful, it has not been without its challenges. The first challenge was communicating to the college the types of services we offer and what we are not. Multiple approaches were developed to communicate this, including open houses for faculty, visiting department meetings, creating a website for our services, and demonstrating services through workshops designed to meet other college needs. Along with these messaging approaches, we had to create a process for requesting support and tracking projects. We ended up using Smartsheet to accomplish this, allowing us to receive requests, move them through various stages, and track a variety of data points.

Additionally, we had to think of ways to counter the mindset of "critique" and "I don't need help." From a critique perspective, I felt there was tension: people felt they were being judged for their courses, even though our intent was to improve what existed. Along with that same thought process, faculty within a college of education often feel they do not need assistance with instruction-related matters. One of the methods I attempted to help communicate this was not the case throughout leadership, was heavily pursuing instructional design projects within the unit I lead. I did this and shared the results to help show other academic leaders our intent was to improve, and my faculty were completely onboard.

The final challenge that comes to mind is something raised by the instructional designers: the reality of the dual role. My experience in mentoring has been specifically faculty-centric, which this role also has a component of; however, the mentorship and support they need as instructional designers are different. It has helped push me outside of my comfort zone and think about different aspects of mentorship. Along with this is the uncertainty related to progression, evaluation, etc., as we are building this ship while it is sailing. We are working to address these issues, but they require time within university

constraints. Overall, I find myself in a dual role: trying to establish a unit within my academic department that is not necessarily traditional, while also leading a large department and realistically serving our students. This dichotomy is challenging and requires the ability to switch hats incredibly quickly, sometimes, depending on the day's emergency, leaving me constantly shifting between feeling like an expert and feeling like we're completely off the map.

Cross-Voice Dialogues and Shared Themes

This study uses CAE to identify and synthesize recurring themes across three distinct perspectives: an emerging professional, a seasoned faculty-ID, and an administrator. By leveraging individual reflections with group discussions, we illuminated the structural, relational, and personal dimensions of navigating the development of these hybrid roles. What emerged were shared challenges around role clarity and workload balance, alongside opportunities for mentorship, creativity, and strategic advocacy.

Making the Role Legible

Participants repeatedly described the work of explaining what IDs do and why it matters. The administrator recalled telling a presenter, "This is what I am trained in; there's a whole field of research and practice devoted to this," and feeling that instructional design is "often overlooked." The complexities of the field are well documented, from the shift towards a learner-centered approach (Reigeluth, 2016) to documenting the evolution of ID competencies that require advanced technology-based, business acumen, evaluation, systems thinking, project management, and design thinking skills (Koszalka et al., 2013).

The emerging professional similarly described encounters that required on-the-spot translation of her role: "Hi there! So what is it that you do again? (instructional design) So, what do you think about the new AI?" She added, "I wished that they would see the depth behind what we can actually do, and why instructional design is important...beyond the surface level consultations or asking about Outlook/technology tools and setups." The tech-centricity and uncertainty of what roles the instructional designer holds are echoed in the findings of (Ritzhaupt & Kumar, 2015) where instructional designers are often seen as tech/IT support on the surface level, but the job requires a complex amalgamation of knowledge of ID theory, soft and technical skills, while being able to adapt and keep abreast of emerging technologies.

The seasoned-ID underscored how this ambiguity persists: "The role was not as clearly defined from the outset… we have been in a period of constant negotiation and iteration." This identity work often took the form of explaining responsibilities, demonstrating value, and modeling collaborative practices to earn trust. For the emerging professional and seasoned-ID, these moments arose when colleagues expressed uncertainty or surprise about their scope of work; for the administrator, legitimacy-building involved visible demonstrations of partnership with faculty to normalize instructional design (ID) collaboration. These accounts align with scholarship emphasizing that trust, shared understanding of the ID role, and visible administrative support are prerequisites for effective collaboration (Pollard & Kumar, 2022; Richardson et al., 2018).

Negotiation as Collaborative Work

Friction surfaced as a routine—and often productive—part of collaboration. The emerging professional wrote, "Sometimes there isn't a clearly defined need, other times you need to step in… give the client something to work with, before you actually arrive at the discrete tasks you need to accomplish." She also captured identity pressures in colleagues' questions: "'So which is it that you want to be? An instructional designer or a professor? 'So, what's the end goal?'" The seasoned-ID described constant boundary-setting with colleagues and units: "Shaping and reshaping the contour of the work while trying to meet the emerging needs of the faculty, programs, and administration." Participants framed these tensions not as failures but as routine elements of cross-role collaboration, requiring negotiation and adaptation. Empirical work suggests such conflict is frequent and patterned, often centering on design decisions, pedagogical autonomy, and scheduling (Mueller et al., 2022). Status and recognition dynamics also surfaced as underlying causes, particularly in "responsibility creep" moments where IDs were asked to take on tasks outside their defined responsibilities. This reflects Mueller et al.'s (2022) observation that unresolved status

issues can prolong or intensify process conflicts. Consistent with prior research, these negotiations mirror common patterns of conflict around autonomy, process, and timelines—and can strengthen partnerships when surfaced and addressed directly (Mueller et al., 2022; Drysdale, 2021).

Responsibility Creep and Boundaries

All three narratives point to role expansion beyond initial expectations. The emerging professional shared, "Oftentimes, you are asked to review a course, but the client means to help them create a course, and you need to learn to manage shifting requests, and their expectations – course review takes several weeks, and design can easily take a few months!" Here, the faculty-IDer acts beyond the scope of an instructional conscience (Dicks & Ives, 2008) and moves into the territory of leveraging their teaching expertise to complete a complete overhaul of a new course. This differs substantially from a finite project.

The seasoned-ID captured this saying: "A phrase that fills me with slight fear is: 'Oh, the IDs can do that.'" They continued, the range of tasks "blurred the lines sometimes between strategic work and reactive work… making it difficult to sometimes prioritize the kind of deep, creative design that requires uninterrupted space and focus."

The administrator recognized the structural risk: "We had to create a process for requesting support and tracking projects… We ended up utilizing Smartsheet…" and described efforts to counter "the mindset of 'critique' and 'I don't need help.'" The literature identifies role ambiguity, workload imbalance, and unclear reward structures as recurring challenges for faculty-IDs, recommending that institutions develop policies to clarify responsibilities and recognize contributions (Pollard & Kumar, 2022; Stefaniak, 2021). In line with Richardson et al. (2018), participants' narratives highlighted the importance of formalized processes, clear expectations, and recognition mechanisms to prevent burnout and maximize effectiveness.

Creativity and Cognitive Switching

Participants described the cost of toggling between teaching and design. The seasoned-ID wrote, "On the one hand, I teach graduate students… On the other hand, I'm expected to produce creative outputs (course redesigns, instructional materials, media assets) for faculty across the college." Additionally, stressing the toll constant switching takes on the designer. The emerging professional narrated her own creative reframing: "My experiences… were guided by mentors who placed learner needs above technology use; using technology intentionally, and as needed, and not for just being in the loop." The administrator recognizes these challenges, saying: "We're building the ship while it is sailing." These reflections underscore the need for structures that protect time for deep creative work and dialogic design processes (Drysdale, 2021).

Mentorship and Capacity-Building

Mentorship emerged as a stabilizing practice for both people and the new unit. The emerging professional shared mentorship as being synonymous with care, and an opportunity to be of service to others and a standard that grounds learner-centered design and ID work "my mentors are the best educators, and each student leaves their class feeling care and this is something I mirrored in my ID work, mentoring preservice and other graduate students as I took on more leadership roles in the later stage of my doctorate program." Mancilla & Frey (2025) position mentorship as essential to professional growth and development of IDs, with mentoring needs evolving at each stage of the ID career (Mancilla et al., 2024).

The seasoned-ID shared similar thoughts, "Supporting her has been a grounding part of my work, helping her navigate… the unspoken cultural codes of working with other faculty in academia." The administrator similarly noted, "The mentorship and support that they need as instructional designers is different… It has helped push me outside of my comfort zone and think about different aspects of mentorship." The literature identifies mentorship, peer support, and communities of practice as critical social supports that strengthen ID performance environments (Pollard & Kumar, 2022). Participants' emphasis on mentorship reflects an intentional strategy for building sustainable capacity within the new unit.

CAE as Practice-Based Inquiry

Finally, the narratives show CAE's value for surfacing tacit, situated knowledge about the challenges of building a hybrid unit. The emerging professional wrote, "Navigating these expectations did leave me with a sense that I wasn't doing enough ID work, and I frequently hashed out these feelings and paths with my fellow IDer and administrator…" This narrative reflection captures both the emotional and cognitive labor involved in the faculty-hybrid role, and in-process theorizing and collaborative sense-making that reflect practice-based inquiry. Here, negotiation and transaction within the role is shared while reflection, self-questioning, and critical peers (Capobianco, 2007; Marshall, 2001) are essential components of all inquiry and are embedded within ID activity itself as a faculty-ID.

The seasoned-ID concluded, "In the end, inhabiting a newly designed hybrid role often means living in a state of iterative design, of my courses, of collaborations, and of the role itself." Here, iteration is not only a design principle but is embodied in the faculty-hybrid role through practice-based inquiry. The administrator characterized the organizational reality as "building this ship while it is sailing" and "constantly switching between feeling like an expert and feeling like we're off the map completely." These metaphors highlight the improvisational and unstable nature of hybrid work – from a practice-based inquiry perspective, this turbulence is not a flaw or threat but an opportunity, as these circumstances encourage practitioners to articulate their decision-making and recast their strategies, thereby making the tacit explicit.

Cumulatively, these reflective accounts provide insight into how CAE is operationalized as practice-based inquiry. These lived experiences are not simply post-hoc reflections, but they illustrate the complexities of professional practice and reveal how knowledge is co-constructed collectively, reflexively, and in the moment, mirroring the iterative nature of instructional design itself. By being firmly rooted in practice-based scholarship (Bowers et al., 2022; Chang et al., 2013; Clark-Stallkamp, 2025), CAE enables us to see hybrid role creation as an ongoing inquiry in which practice serves both as the vehicle and the outcome of learning. This framing thus situates practitioner accounts not as adjuncts to the academic dialogue but as part of both academic understanding and organizational learning.

Implications for Practice

The lived experiences shared by the emerging professional, seasoned-ID, and administrator highlight both the opportunities and challenges of hybrid faculty–instructional designer roles. As revealed through collaborative autoethnography, these roles are situated in dynamic institutional contexts where expectations, authority, and workflows are often negotiated in real time. The following implications synthesize these insights into actionable considerations for institutions, leaders, and practitioners.

Clarifying and Communicating Hybrid Faculty–ID Roles

The findings reinforce the need for intentional role design and clear communication about the hybrid faculty–ID position. Ambiguity in responsibilities, decision-making authority, and expectations can lead to responsibility creep, strained collaborations, and diminished recognition of contributions (Pollard & Kumar, 2022; Stefaniak, 2021). Institutions establishing or expanding such roles should co-create role descriptions with input from both academic leadership and practicing faculty–IDs, revisiting these documents annually to align with evolving departmental needs and incorporating expectations into promotion and/or tenure expectations. Making this role legible to faculty, administrators, and students through formal orientation sessions, regular updates, and visible contributions to high-profile projects can enhance trust and integration into the academic community (Richardson et al., 2018).

Building Sustainable Workflows and Support Structures

The hybrid nature of faculty–ID work often requires balancing teaching, course design, and broader institutional projects, which increases the risk of overload and burnout. To mitigate this, institutions should establish workload policies that explicitly allocate time for design work, professional development, and research aligned with practice-based scholarship (Bowers et al.,

2022; Boyer, 1990). Project intake and tracking tools, such as Smartsheet or shared dashboards, can streamline requests, maintain transparency, and help prioritize strategic work over purely reactive tasks. In addition, administrator support to help shift responsibilities when faculty-IDs need additional time for larger projects is essential. Mentorship programs, within and beyond the department, can also provide crucial socialization into institutional culture, support professional growth, and strengthen cross-campus networks (Mueller et al., 2022).

Leveraging CAE for Continuous Improvement and PBS

This study demonstrates how collaborative autoethnography can serve as a method for both professional inquiry and organizational learning. Engaging faculty–IDs, administrators, and other stakeholders in structured narrative reflection can reveal systemic barriers, highlight effective practices, and guide policy decisions (Chang et al., 2013; Clark-Stallkamp, 2025). Embedding such reflective cycles into annual planning processes can support a culture of iterative improvement, aligning with Boyer's (1990) scholarship of application by directly linking professional expertise to real-world problem-solving. By positioning faculty–ID reflections as valid and valued scholarly contributions, institutions can recognize and reward the intellectual labor involved in bridging theory and practice, further legitimizing these roles within the academic reward structure.

Conclusion

The faculty-ID hybrid role is both complex and valuable. Faculty IDs are well-positioned to co-construct learning experiences with faculty in higher education that focus not only on discipline-specific outcomes but also prompt peers to engage in self-reflection and continuous improvement of these experiences. While role ambiguity and institutional barriers pose challenges, integrating instructional design expertise with faculty experience creates meaningful opportunities for collaboration and innovation. We use collaborative autoethnography to provide a multi-voiced account of how hybrid professionals and faculty navigate institutional ambiguity, workload tensions, and cultural barriers. We share examples and discuss the challenges, opportunities, and innovations this hybrid role offers, and reflect on our evolving identities and sensemaking as faculty-IDs. While institutional ambiguity around evaluation, workload, and advancement remains an unresolved challenge, our findings show that its effects are experienced most immediately through responsibility creep, identity negotiation, and uneven recognition of design labor. Mentorship and collaborative sensemaking emerged as provisional but powerful stabilizers during this period of role formation. Rather than presenting a finalized model, this study illustrates how hybrid faculty–ID roles are actively designed in practice through iterative negotiation within institutional constraints

Our work serves as an example of PBS, demonstrating how reflective practice can drive change in instructional design and faculty development. We not only document the complexity of faculty-ID work but also offer institutions and administrators a clearer understanding of how to converse, navigate, negotiate, and support these roles. Moving forward, greater institutional recognition and structural support will be necessary to sustain and maximize the impact of faculty-IDs in higher education.

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