

Introduction to the Special Issue

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As facilitators of the learning experience, instructional designers possess the power to create equitable learning environments through their design processes and decisions. However, it is crucial to recognize that instructional designers do not operate in isolation (Bichelmeyer, 2020; Stefaniak, 2015). The decisions they make regarding design are not independent of the context or the surrounding environment. Instructional designers function as integral parts of a larger system (Bond, et al., 2021). From a macro-level systems thinking perspective, instructional designers design learning experiences and operate within interconnected systems that extend beyond themselves. It is within the interconnections of these systems and their collective components that designers have the ability to shape or be shaped by the prevailing cultural and organizational paradigms.

At the micro level of systems thinking, instructional design decisions are based on assumptions and cultural norms (Sockman & Kieselbach, 2022). These well-informed decisions still stem from personal and collective experiences within the prevailing dominant rules and norms of the larger macro-level system. For instance, consider an employee who is expecting to have dinner with a distinguished person. To ensure they make a favorable impression, the employee conducts research on accepted meal etiquette. In this scenario, the employee identifies the dominant expectations of the larger system, as their main concern is to create a positive impact. Those eating habits and all our creations reflect cultural norms. The innumerable norms that are rarely questioned (Wilkerson, 2020), ingrain themselves the way that brains are mapped and then express themselves in attitudes, activities, and designs in overt and covert proclamations of what “should be” (Nosek, et al., 2007).

Instructional designers are immersed in these cultural norms on a daily basis, and they influence design decisions. Awareness starts as a member of the supra, macro, meso cultures that influence a person and their identity (Kendi, 2019). When designers become immersed in a particular organization or culture, they employ some or all of the cultural nuances of that system. Over time, a designer is enculturated to the norms and behaviors of the dominant system. Designers pass the knowledge of the dominant system on in their designs, to their fellow designers, to their trainees, and the system continues to perpetuate the same assumptions, values, and norms. The system is easily viewed as normal, monolithic, or as Berger and Luckman (1966) refer, ‘the way it has always been’. Therefore, when a learning environment is created, it too reflects the dominant cultural norms in society, the organization, and the individual designers. The learning environment becomes part of perpetuating the dominant narrative.

As individuals, norms are initially established during early stages of development and then adjusted within each system we engage in (Bradshaw, 2017; brown, 2017; Nosek, et al., 2007). We undergo socialization through normalization into these systems, shaping our perception of how the world is supposed to function in our lived reality (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2015; Stroh, 2015). As a result, norms unconsciously influence every aspect of our lives which by nature have biases that either encourage or discourage equity when instructional designers create instruction (Hutmacher, et.al, 2001). Instructional designs dedicated toward equity critically question norms to push past them.

An instructional designer dedicated toward equity ensures “that everyone has what they need in order to be successful” (Chardin & Novak, 2021, p.14). Equity has been theorized and examined from practical application and even operationalized in instructional design tools such as Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2013). Also, designers pursue understanding beyond single methods or strategies since there are a myriad of ways to design for different purposes (Bichelmeyer, 2020; Spector, et al., 2014), and to pursue equity means to question norms within each design process and each creation (Bradshaw, 2017; brown, 2017; Chardin & Novak, 2022).

In this special issue of Systems Thinking Designing for Equity, authors share ways that they conceptualize or implement designing for equity with their position papers, proposed models, design cases, and empirical studies. In “A Model for Culturally Sustaining Instructional Design” Colleen M. Smith and K. Bret Staudt Willet use systems to understand the higher education landscape and the way to design in diverse culturally sustaining ways when engaging with content and media. Arpita Pal proposes “Liberatory Design Thinking for Equity-Centered Instructional Design: A Systems Thinking Analysis” to provide a model that centers the Liberatory Thinking Framework for a learner-centered perspective. In a position paper Jennifer D. Moses, Hannah B. Bayne, Robert L. Moore contribute research on trauma-informed pedagogies in online spaces to enhance student safety, engagement, and learning outcomes within asynchronous learning environments in their article “Guiding Course Development: Trauma-Informed Rubrics for Asynchronous Online Learning Environments.” These conceptual papers emphasize the nature, extent, or key conceptualizations of systems thinking and/or change theory and knowledge, examining the current, historical, or possible future status of systems thinking’s role in promoting social justice in instructional and performance design.

Designing for equity means the dominant culture does not determine all design decisions but rather designers focus on the diversity of learners. The next group of articles focuses on what practitioners are doing in authentic contexts. Using observed results, these studies intentionally disrupt dominant systems overshadowing the learning process and learner’s needs. Daniela Gachago, Maha Bali and Nicola Pallitt use their positionality and experience to draw on understandings of women who support equity-oriented learning design across the world in “Changing from Within - Narratives of Resistance from Equity-Oriented Learning Designers.” The paper highlights the strategies learning designers use to navigate clashes between their own values and those held by their institutions. Rita Fennelly-Atkinson and Kimberly LaPrairie report on a quantitative study with 62 global participants in “Analysis of Associated Factors that Influence the Accessibility of Online Higher Education.” The findings indicate growth in the implementation of accessible course design practices that are based on institutional accessibility support.

The final two articles focus on equity in course designs. The first “Designing systems with care: Responding to inequality in an online course in South Africa,” Shanali Govender, Christine Immenga, and Daniela Gachago use Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory and trauma-informed pedagogies to guide design and then, conduct participant interviews to investigate how caring learning design facilitated students’ experiences. The article “From Nature to Pen: Designing an Inclusive Writing Course for Educators” was written by a design team of educators, park rangers and professors who utilized instructional design processes with Levels of Culture to open nature spaces and writing practices to create an asynchronous course for educators. Both articles candidly discuss the challenges and opportunities faced within the system when intentionally designing and implementing an inclusive course design.

Instructional designers may act in accordance with the dominant system to the detriment of other learning needs as part of a perpetuating cycle or work to change the system. Therefore, doing ‘good work’ or ethical work means considering the influence of the systems designers are a part of (Chardin & Novak, 2021). Designers are called by ethical and professional responsibility to develop and design more equitable systems - to understand, engage, and dismantle the harmful aspects of dominant power systems which influence instructional design (Bradshaw, 2017; Moore, 2014). This special issue offers practical examples that demonstrate how systems thinking and instructional design can advance towards creating more equitable learning environments, catering to diverse learners and striving for improved systems. With gratitude to all the authors for their commitment, we are confident that together, we will persist in our efforts to foster a more equitable world.

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