

Supporting Diverse Workforces: As A Change Agent, One Instructional Designer Brings Design Justice to Instructional Design Practice

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Design Thinking Design Justice Diverse Workforce

Design justice offers designers a framework to rethink design processes to center the voice of the learner and bring equity and inclusion to marginalized learners (Constanza-Chock, 2020). This article positions the instructional designer as a change agent through one designer's narrative and their efforts to carry out the work of equity and inclusion with a diverse employee population in higher education. The case details how an instructional designer shifts a design team from designing "for" learners to designing "with" them through the framework of design justice to support organizations with diverse learner populations.

Introduction

Instructional design (ID) teams that design employee educational programming for large, diverse workforces face various challenges. This single case details the challenges I met as the leader of an instructional design team responsible for the design and delivery of employee educational programming and resources for faculty and staff situated within a complex organization of higher education. My learner population comprises more than 25,000 faculty and staff across a statewide university system. The content focus of employee educational programming (e.g., digital courses, digital resources, in-person sessions, and webinars) is a complicated body of literature on compensation and benefits or total rewards. The goal of our team is to help faculty and staff make informed decisions about health and financial benefits at the time of hire and throughout the employee lifecycle.

Our team implements and executes a thoughtful design process resulting in a robust educational program for new, current, and retired faculty and staff. We manage accessible digital assets, conduct in-person workshops, and Zoom sessions, and support accessible electronic resources for a diverse learner population. Though I can tell a story of much success, the story leading to practical considerations for instructional designers is filled with challenges. This case details the self-reflective engagement with the principles of design justice that helped me to bring transformative change to our design process. The observations from my lived experience will detail progress in advancing equity and inclusion work from mission statement to action in instructional design practice (Van Manen, 2016).

Defining the Case

As the leader of the ID team, my goal is to create equitable educational programming and resources that will effectively reach all the learners in our large learning population. In this case, I was diligent in using ID practices and models, striving for accessible assets for the entire learning population. Our team's challenge emerged when, despite the team's use of ID practices and models driven by design thinking (human-centric design) and universal design (UD), significant barriers continued to exist for populations of learners where race, gender, age, language, and socio-economic factors intersected. These employees could not access employee educational programming and resources due to computer literacy, language, and cultural barriers. This resulted in an unequal distribution of burden with detrimental effects on the employees and their dependents (Collins, 2021).

In this manuscript, I will begin by outlining the issues that instructional designers face when designing for a diverse learner population: (a) the complexities of a diverse workforce in higher education, (b) instructional designers as agents of change or perpetrators of harm, and (c) the limitations of the existing ID models in equity and inclusion. Next, I will introduce the framework of design justice and its potential impact on the field of instructional design. The case study will detail my lived experience of the introduction of the framework of design justice into my personal design practice and as a leader of an ID team (Van Manen, 2016). This case will offer observations within the context that the intervention occurred (Baxter, 2008; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Finally, I will offer observational insight into the question: How did the principles of design justice help an instructional designer begin to bring transformative change to the design process?

Issues Instructional Designers Face When Designing for a Diverse Learner Population

Complexities of a Diverse Workforce

The diversity of faculty and staff, and their roles within higher education, make the delivery of educational programs and resources about total rewards complex. In a large, public institution of higher education, the faculty and staff evidence diversity by nature and intention. Diversity exists first by the university's unique nature, as public universities are microcosms of the communities they serve, the larger society, and the world (Stanley et al., 2019). The positions of faculty and staff are multi-dimensional, representing many socio-economic roles in society. Some examples include (a) housing, dining, facilities, and maintenance, (b) transportation, (c) administration, (d) medical entities, (e) research facilities, and (f) the arts and humanities. The workforce is also diverse by intention through DEI mission statements, initiatives, and program implementation, resulting in a multi-cultural workforce. The reality of this diversity creates a complex audience.

Agents of Transformative Change or Perpetrators of Harm?

Instructional designers plan, develop, evaluate, and manage the process of instruction through systematic methods to promote successful learning (Kemp et al., 1998). Through these methods and processes, the instructional designer is an agent of change (Moore, 2021; Tracey et al., 2014). Understanding the impact and influence instructional designers have on systems supports their role as change agents (Stefaniak, 2019). Instructional designers have the power to influence change through

thoughtful, intentional design. This intentionality can bring equity and inclusion to formerly inequitable spaces, provoking meaningful change within large organizations (Moore, 2021; Tracey et al., 2014). Instructional designers have the power to either promote equitable outcomes or continue to perpetuate harm for marginalized learner populations.

Limitations of Existing ID Models in Social Justice Work

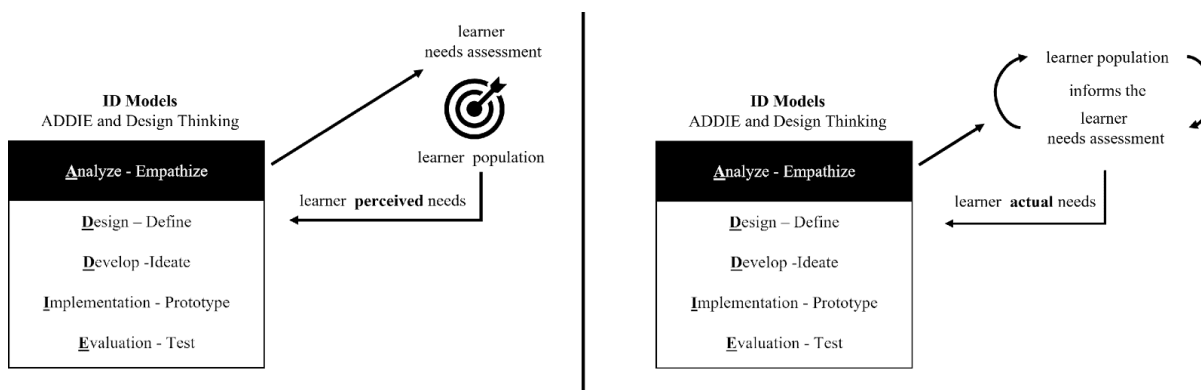
ID models first appeared during a time of segregation, where learning populations were homogeneous with the designer (Moore, 2021). Designers were designing for learners like themselves. Exclusive design outcomes are likely if the ID models employed do not effectively account for the differences between the designer and the learners. The dominant group no longer designs for the dominant group. Instead, the dominant group's design assumptions are imposed upon a diverse group, further perpetuating harm (Constanza-Chock, 2020). As the workforce diversifies, instructional designers face many challenges in their design practice. The greater the diversity within the learner population, the greater the divide between the designer and the learner. Designer assumptions create barriers when those assumptions are born out of the designer's knowledge and experiences of the world.

The Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation (ADDIE) model is a foundational approach that outlines the five phases of the instructional design process. A needs assessment, part of the analysis phase, is the process of determining the gap in performance between the current state and the desired state and provides a foundation that instructional designers build on to determine the instructional methods and resources needed to address the gap (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010; Stefaniak, 2021). Instructional designers establish learning objectives based on the desired state, which informs the rest of the design process. Learner analysis is incomplete when the needs assessment is limited to gathering data "about" learners, resulting in perceived learner needs. Stefaniak and Sentz (2020) encourage instructional designers to verify learners' actual needs versus perceived needs during the needs assessment and analysis.

In efforts to be more inclusive, ID models have shifted to human-centric approaches, including empathic practices or the inclusion of learner personas during the learner needs assessment (Baker & Moukhliiss, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2020). Design thinking is an example of this. It shifts the focus to the learner by introducing empathy in the analysis phase. Designers are encouraged to "tell stories about the lives of potential customers and imagine a different future for them" (Irani, 2018, p. 3). In the end, this still positions the designer in the power position, making designer assumptions about the learner. A designer who employs empathy is still targeting a learning population and gathering data "about" a learner instead of "with" them. The designer makes assumptions about the learner's needs (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Shifting from Learner Perceived to Actual Needs



Designers who are committed to designing with their learning audience are positioned to liberate marginalized learners by understanding learners' "actual" needs (Constanza-Chock, 2020).

Design Justice and Instructional Design Practice

Design justice seeks to bring social justice to design work across various disciplines of design. This framework guides design theory and practice and brings transformative change resulting in more equitable and inclusive outcomes (Constanza-Chock, 2018). Through collaborative conversations with various designers in varied design disciplines, Constanza-Chock (2018) started a movement that challenged designers to see the limitations in good intentions and instead worked to formulate a set of principles. These principles help practitioners reduce the reproduction of existing inequalities and harm. Design justice proposes that the design process can ensure liberation for marginalized populations currently harmed by design outcomes (Constanza-Chock, 2020).

As this community grows and continues the conversation through research and shared narratives of practice, design justice is defined as the rethinking of design processes that "centers people who are normally marginalized by design, and uses collaborative, creative practice to address the deepest changes our communities face" (<https://designjustice.org>). Design justice provides a framework to identify who is helped and who is harmed by design and then centers the voice of the learner in the design process to reduce harm and inequities. Design justice recognizes, seeks out, and includes those who are currently marginalized in the process of design. Design justice is currently expressed through ten principles (Table 1).

Table 1

The Principles of Design Justice; <https://designjustice.org/read-the-principles>, October 22, 2022

1	Design to sustain, heal, and empower our communities, as well as to seek liberation from exploitive and oppressive systems.
2	Center the voices of those who are directly impacted by the outcomes of the design process.
3	Prioritize the design's impact on the community over the intentions of the designer.
4	View change as emergent from an accountable, accessible, and collaborative process rather than as a point at the end of a process.
5	See the role of the designer as a facilitator rather than an expert.
6	Believe that everyone is an expert based on their own lived experiences and that everyone has unique and brilliant contributions to bring to the design process.
7	Share design knowledge with our communities.

8	Work towards sustainable, community-led, and controlled outcomes.
9	Work towards non-exploitative solutions that reconnect us to the earth and others.
10	Before seeking new design solutions, look for what is already working at the community level. Honor and uplift traditional, indigenous, and local knowledge and practices.

At the foundation of design justice is the analytical framework of intersectionality, which explains how categories such as race, class, gender, age, and citizenship status position people differently. This framework, through critical inquiry and praxis, becomes a method to empower people (Collins & Bilge, 2021). It allows designers to expand from a single-axis perspective to one considering where race, class, and gender, for example, intersect to gain an understanding of learner context and needs (Constanza-Chock, 2020). Though the design justice network spans multiple design disciplines, the exploration of implementing design justice into current ID models has yet to be introduced into the literature.

The Case

When faced with the challenges of designing educational programming for a large, diverse adult learner population, I was given an opportunity to examine my position as an instructional designer and re-evaluate common ID practices. This case will provide the observations from my lived experience and detail how the principles of design justice helped me as an instructional designer begin to bring transformative change to the design process.

The Problem

Payroll and benefits educational programming is crucial for the health of the university in which our team is situated. Institutions of higher education are experiencing an unprecedented, high rate of faculty and staff turnover (Bichsel et al., 2022). Total compensation is a vital part of employee success, health, and financial wellness. Organizations find themselves in a competitive market, and both future hires and current employees receive help by understanding their total rewards (Picherit-Buthler & Freitag, 2009). When faculty and staff cannot understand, access, or use their total rewards, both the employee and the organization suffer. How these benefits are communicated has a major impact on the employee and employer relationship (Picherit-Buthler & Freitag, 2009). It is essential for educational programming and resources to be inclusive and equally accessible to the entire employee population of the university.

Our team relied on ADDIE and the more human-centric model of design thinking. The total rewards content was online and digitally accessible to all employees. All digital assets were created through the lens of UD in an effort to make them accessible to employees using assisted technology. When we learned that there were employee populations that could not access the employee educational programming and resources due to language barriers, we made additional efforts to address it. We translated core courses and resources to Spanish, the largest population of non-native English speakers. We ensured that all digital courses included notes to aid employees in using translation services for additional populations of non-native English speakers (e.g., Nepalese, Lao, Mandarin, Tibetan, ASL). In addition, we tested digital assets for mobile usability.

Though we met the requirements of UD, the assets still did not meet the needs of the entire population. The assessment of the various segments of the workforce fell short because both individual and institutional biases influenced the analysis, which resulted in an exclusive design based on the perceived needs of the learner population. In our case, the large size and diversity of the learning population made it impossible to empathize with all learners. Unintentionally, we were still in a mindset of designing for an audience much like us (Brown & Green, 2015). Good intentions, empathy, and action still resulted in poor learner outcomes. Designing "for" this group left them without proper access to the information they needed because it was our assumptions creating the barriers (Table 2)

Table 2

Designer Assumptions and Learner Barriers

Designer Assumptions	Reality of Learners	Barrier Created by Design
All employees have access to computers (issued a university device).	Not all employees are issued university computers due to the scope of work.	Many employees cannot access any of the educational programming and resources for their pay and benefits.
All employees are computer literate.	Not all employees in the university are computer literate. Intersecting factors of socio-economical status, citizenship status, education level, and language may impact computer access and literacy.	Many employees cannot access any of the educational programming and resources for their pay and benefits.
All employees have access to email or the employee portal.	It was discovered that many employees never access either.	Email and the employee portal are the primary ways of communicating pay and benefits information. Therefore, many employees never receive vital communications.
All employees are literate in English.	There are at least seven different native-speaking languages represented.	Even if accessed, many employees struggle to understand educational programming and resources for their pay and benefits.
All employees are literate in healthcare plans.	Intersecting factors of socio-economic status, citizenship status, education level, and language may impact how healthcare systems and insurance are understood or accessed.	If access and language barriers are overcome, educational programming and resources may still not meet the needs of overcoming cultural understanding of complicated pay and benefits information.
All employees are literate in financial planning.	Intersecting factors of socio-economic status, citizenship status, education level, and language may impact the understanding of financial planning and retirement.	If access and language barriers are overcome, educational programming and resources may still not meet the needs of overcoming cultural understanding of complicated pay and benefits information.

The Shift

The identification and examination of learner barriers caused me to examine and explore current ID practices and to ask deeper questions about diversity, equity, and inclusivity (DEI) to decide if integrating the two could start to solve some of the exclusivity problems. I examined and explored current ID practices to ask deeper questions about DEI principles in the design process to decide if a better integration of the two could start to solve some of the exclusivity and biases embedded within the system.

This led me to Sasha Constanza-Chock's (2020) work, *Design Justice*. Through a self-reflective process as a designer, I emerged with transformative steps that helped me shift our design process to promote more equitable outcomes.

Through our work, it became clear that we needed a shift in our approach to the needs assessment to bring equity and inclusion to marginalized employee populations. Our current practice was only able to determine learner-perceived needs. We needed to gather data about this population's actual needs (Stefaniak, 2020). I worked with the team to deepen the analysis of our learner populations to find ways to lessen the divide created by complex diversity between designer and learner. As much as we wanted to empathize with our learners, the complexity of the diversity and the size of the learner audience made it challenging to understand all employees. As I built relationships and facilitated conversations, we learned that learners could shape design through their lived experience, not a designer-contrived context.

I found guidance, on a personal level first, through the framework of design justice. This provided me with a new perspective as an instructional designer and a team leader. It provided tangible steps to change the course of the embedded biases influencing our design process. I make no claims to have arrived at or achieved the correction of all the inequities. On the contrary, work has just begun, with promising initial outcomes. Table 3 outlines how the principles influenced my self-reflective initial outcomes as an instructional designer and team leader.

Table 3

The Incorporation of Design Justice

Principles of Design Justice	Impact on My Design Perspective
Design to sustain, heal, and empower our communities, as well as to seek liberation from exploitive and oppressive systems. Work towards non-exploitive solutions that reconnect us to the earth and others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through reflective practice, I recognize the educational system in which we are working creates designer and institutional biases. I am committed to continuing to find ways to take steps to sustain, heal, and empower all employees. I am actively working towards the development and implementation of a transformative needs assessment in our ID practice.
Center the voices of those who are directly impacted by the outcomes of the design process. Believe that everyone is an expert based on their own lived experiences and that everyone has unique and brilliant contributions to bring to the design process. Work towards sustainable, community-led, and controlled outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I realized we were designing "for" our learner audience and am committed to shifting my personal and team practices to designing "with" our learner audience. I am developing and implementing a transformative needs assessment for multiple learner populations as opposed to treating it as one learner population. I am committed to listening and finding avenues that give voice to employee populations to learn from them.
Prioritize the design's impact on the community over the intentions of the designer. See the role of the designer as a facilitator rather than an expert.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I am committed to facilitating the conversations needed within the system until the inequitable outcomes find a resolution. I continue to grapple with the tension between stakeholder needs and budget/capacity limitations. I am open to seeking solutions for existing barriers within the marginalized employee populations.
View change as emergent from an accountable, accessible, and collaborative process rather than as a point at the end of a process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I recognized survey results were not a representation of all employee groups because the marginalized were not filling out the surveys. I continue a collaborative process across the system of relationship building and recognize small steps are good steps.
Share design knowledge with our communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In building relationships, I am working with campus partners to express intentional design.
Before seeking new design solutions, look for what is already working at the community level. Honor and uplift traditional, indigenous, and local knowledge and practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I am committed to listening and learning from our various employee populations. I am committed to assessing current resources and identifying adaptations.

Recognizing the power I possess as a change agent as an instructional designer, I am committed to bringing transformative change to my design practice in order to increase equitable learner outcomes. Design justice served as a basis to consider tangible ways in which to take manageable steps to give voice to learners in such a complex system. The concept of centering the learners' voices caused me to intentionally begin to find ways to bring the lived experiences of the various employee populations to the needs assessment (Constanza-Chock, 2020). Practically, it is an overwhelming undertaking to find systematic ways to work towards solutions. One example of a small step with meaningful impact was when I began to intentionally seek out ways to build relationships with various employee populations. This started with analytical work to break the large population into tangible employee groups. The first goal was to look for opportunities to build relationships with the campus partners who directly influence the various groups. In one encounter, I found an opportunity to learn from a campus partner who works directly with African and African American faculty members on one of our campuses. During our conversation, he told a story of how first-generation college students from marginalized backgrounds may be traumatized using the shopping cart icon in online course registration. Through a narrative of lived experience, the campus partner explained how students coming from backgrounds where food insecurity is a reality meant their lived experience often included trips to the store where essentials were put into a shopping cart often necessitated removal at the checkout counter due to lack of funds. This repeated experience in childhood was associated with negative, traumatic feelings. A straightforward design choice in course registration was potentially causing harm to end users. This conversation was informative to me as something to consider in design choices for faculty and staff benefits enrollment. I learned this through purposeful relationships and listening. Listening is the key to centering the voice of an

employee population in the design process. I applied principles two, six, and eight and shifted from an expert designing “for” a group to the facilitator of a conversation and learned a perspective outside of my own lived experience.

Another example is how we are in the process of breaking down the designer assumptions with the large population of employees in service positions on campus. These designer assumptions and resulting barriers are outlined in Table 2. Throughout the years, our department had offered occasional sessions in Spanish and Laotian if resources were available and if there was a request from the campus. However, this was not a regular, intentional part of the outreach design. My goal was to become more intentional and conduct critical inquiry where race, class, gender, age, and citizenship status were intersecting factors for the employee population. I intentionally began to facilitate relationships with the campus partners. Though still in its infancy, this facilitation has helped the design team learn about the lived experiences of this employee population. Through these conversations, we learned the total rewards educational programming could better be serviced through existing campus DEI work being done in ESL and computer literacy labs on campus. Taking the existing total rewards content and integrating it with literacy labs is one step towards making the content more accessible to the population. As a team, we have taken time to observe in-person sessions that utilize translators. We observed that translators were struggling with text-heavy slides as they tried to translate the slides first and then the speaker. This was a small observation, but as a result, we now design all our slides with minimal text, and we provide the organizers with our English scripts well in advance of the events so that the translators can familiarize themselves with the content prior to the event.

My plan is to incorporate adaptations to the educational programming of healthcare, retirement, and tuition assistance throughout the next year. I am currently introducing our ID team to the framework of design justice. In addition, I am leading them through the development and implementation of a transformative needs assessment that will strengthen relationships and build trust with the learners in this population (Jackson et al., 2018; Mertens, 2021). This will create space and opportunity to continue to center their voices in future design.

Recommendations for Instructional Designers and DEI Work

Equity and inclusion work is hard. It is complex, and it is sometimes overwhelming. This should not deter us from work needing to be done to support a healthy organization and society. I have three main recommendations for instructional designers within large, complex institutions or organizations.

First, be intentional and recognize the power in design practice. As designers, we solve problems. The first step to a solution is identification. The analysis, when conducted through the lens of design justice, is powerful. It helps to identify exclusivity problems and inequities. As a designer, I can find clear inequities, sound the alarm, and work towards the liberation of oppressed learners or I can continue in oppressive practice. This change agency invokes the responsibility to contemplate and explore more possibilities.

Second, recognize instructional designers bring our own perspective to the table. Positioning ourselves as design expert limits the potential to see different perspectives. Becoming a design facilitator, skilled in relationship building and acute listening skills, will allow the design process to incorporate other perspectives and enrich the data gathered during the various phases of design practice. Look for ways to step back and give voice to other perspectives. If possible, find ways to diversify the design team. I have found this to be a current challenge, which gives me even more reason to make sure I find methods to allow the learner’s voice to be heard above my own.

Finally, instructional designers can lead DEI initiatives. Speak up and help leadership, stakeholders, and others within the systems see and understand the biases as they emerge. This involves self-reflective practice and institutional reflection. If an institution’s mission is DEI, be the voice and offer solutions in your learning context to help put action to and achieve the goals of that mission. Today’s small steps can lead to tomorrow’s breakthroughs in crushing oppressive practices.

Conclusion

This case displays the power instructional designers have in influencing change in large systems, especially around the work of equity and inclusion. Integrating the design justice into existing ID models by deepening the components of the analysis, prototype, and evaluation stages enables instructional designers to carry out equity work in currently exclusive systems. The process is iterative. Large complex systems cannot be corrected all at once, and designers cannot solve it all. Instead, designers contribute in limited but powerful ways when designing for equity and inclusion with intentional decisions. For this reason, our design team will continue to act and find ways to sustain and empower through our design work. With each step, we continue to make progress in relieving oppression, encouraging healing, and empowering all.

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