Experiences of Higher Education Instructional Designers as Remote Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Waneta Hebert, Arlene Ramirez, James Wilson, Kimberly N. LaPrairie, & Diana Lopez

DOI:10.59668/806.14440

Instructional Designers | COVID-19 Pandemic | Phenomenology | Higher Education Institutions | Work from Home

The COVID-19 pandemic-driven shift to emergency remote teaching (ERT) tasked instructional designers (IDs) with supporting faculty while simultaneously transitioning to a work-from-home (WFH) environment. In the post-pandemic return of students to physical campuses, IDs continued to WFH, triggering a need for those training IDs for future dynamic learning situations to understand their realities. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this study explored the lived experiences of six IDs who worked remotely for the first time during the COVID-19 pandemic. Six themes were revealed through participant interviews: job responsibilities, work communication, equipment needs, WFH benefits, future work plans, and WFH challenges.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the structure of formal education overnight. Educational institutions were driven to emergency remote teaching (ERT) to ensure learning continuity while safeguarding against the spread of the virus (Hodges et al., 2020). Shifting to an alternate mode of instruction resulted in fluctuating roles of support personnel, especially in higher education institutions (HEIs). By the fall of 2020, two-thirds of all United States colleges were primarily online (Dennon, 2021), resulting in instructional designers (IDs) frequently being tasked with supporting faculty in their shift to ERT while transitioning to a work-from-home (WFH) environment (Abramenka-Lachheb et al., 2021; Petherbridge et al., 2022; Xie & Rice, 2021; Xie et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted work arrangements of many positions across diverse industries. Roles previously viewed as requiring in-person interactions were suddenly functioning well in a remote environment (Yang et al., 2022). A press release by Gartner (2020) indicated that, in turn, 82% of company leaders planned to continue to allow employees to WFH. Nearly two years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, data gathered by the Pew Research Center confirmed that this WFH trend continued as workplaces began to reopen (Parker et al., 2022). Companies that previously never envisioned adopting a WFH model opted not to return to their pre-COVID-19 pandemic arrangements. Instead, many shifted toward hybrid models where employees work remotely and in the office to varying degrees, with some adopting a unique approach to this "mixed-mode model," allowing employees to choose a remote, hybrid, or traditional work arrangement (Yang et al., 2022). Similarly, as HEIs phase out ERT, ID positions are expected to remain remote or hybrid post-pandemic (Kim, 2022), generating a need to explore the experiences of IDs who became remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic to better prepare for the realities of WFH moving forward.

Starting even before the COVID-19 pandemic, industry perspectives were recognizing that IDs serve a greater purpose than previously acknowledged, one of analyzing and determining the best solution for specific learning situations (Dickson-Deane & Asino, 2018). By the same token, HEIs are now appreciating the value of IDs in all aspects of post-digital era learning (Nworie, 2021; Shappee, 2022; Xie & Rice, 2021). Still, a 2022 report from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on the global impacts and lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education does not mention IDs in any of its 68 pages. The report does, however, describe a continued effort to provide proper training for faculty in online and hybrid instruction (Abdrasheva et al., 2022), a responsibility frequently bestowed upon IDs (Abramenka-Lachheb et al., 2021; Kumar & Ritzhaupt, 2017; Petherbridge et al., 2022; Xie & Rice, 2021; Xie et al., 2021).

Current research pertaining to IDs in HEIs during the COVID-19 pandemic is sparse and is focused on ERT experiences. For instance, in a study by Xie and Rice (2021) IDs were interviewed to determine the challenges relating to supporting faculty during ERT, as well as the changing role of the ID. Likewise, in a reflective essay, IDs shared their strategies and practices for supporting faculty during ERT (Abramenka-Lachheb et al., 2021). Petherbridge et al. (2022) also interviewed IDs, focusing on the ID process rather than the IDs' WFH experiences. No studies were identified that examined the experiences of HEI IDs themselves becoming first-time remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

An understanding of the specific realities of IDs in HEIs is essential for those developing these professionals as they continue to WFH beyond the post-pandemic physical return of students to campuses. This study centered on analyzing the experiences of higher education IDs who worked remotely for the first time during the COVID-19 pandemic, defined as March 2020 through May 2021. A hermeneutic phenomenology was employed in this study to gain an awareness of the lived experience of the IDs sampled (Valentine et al., 2018) by answering the research question:

How do IDs in higher education describe their experiences of becoming first-time remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Literature Review

Working from Home

While the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in modern times, societal catastrophes have shaped the workforce before. Correspondingly, WFH is not a novel concept. A prevailing reason employees sought WFH in the early 2000s, for instance, was the fear of becoming a potential target in a terrorist attack on a large city (Gibson et al., 2002). Likewise, the benefits of this mode of work have been documented for at least 20 years. In 2002, Gibson et al. detected three primary benefits to organizations subscribing to WFH, including increased worker productivity, staffing flexibility, and decreased turnover. Furthermore, WFH provided benefits to the employees by satisfying their desire to stay close to their families. This is of interest since work-life balance is frequently cited as a reason for employees to WFH (Gibson et al., 2002; Parker et al., 2022), supporting that employees with strong work-life balance experience job satisfaction, job security, autonomy, stress reduction, and improved health (Chimote & Srivastava, 2013).

Despite these prior experiences, the landscape of the United States workforce has changed drastically compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic. As the world settles into a post-pandemic "normal," there is a clear trend toward remaining remote or hybrid (Parker et al., 2022; Stahl, 2021; Turner & Baker, 2022). Concerns about COVID-19 related health and safety continue to influence employees' decisions to WFH, with more employees across sectors doing so out of choice rather than necessity (Parker et al., 2022). Not unexpectedly, those choosing to WFH regularly report that the shift to remote work has improved their work-life balance while bolstering productivity and the ability to meet workflow expectations.

Even so, some drawbacks to WFH have been noted. In line with prior research findings by Gibson et al. (2002), Parker et al. (2022) noted that sixty percent of new WFH employees reported feeling less connected to their coworkers. In the same study, the PEW Research Center found that many employees approved for remote work chose to return to the office because they felt more productive than working from home. Other less-cited reasons for returning to the workplace included a lack of space and resources at home, more opportunities for advancement, and pressure from supervisors or colleagues.

Research also indicated that employees have a difficult time setting boundaries in a WFH environment, especially considering the increasing use of always-on communication methods (Adkins & Premeaux, 2014; Park et al., 2011). To avoid disparate communication, one HEI in New Hampshire found that the COVID-19 pandemic supported the creation of a centralized communication unit (Keane & May, 2022). Further highlighting the need for organizational support through clear communication, a study by Zito et al. (2021) on the role of organizational communication during the COVID-19 pandemic underlined the importance of supervisors' communication during demanding circumstances.

Roles and Responsibilities of IDs

The increased movement toward online instruction and the heightened need for organizational support have shifted the role of instructional design, presenting new challenges and opportunities for IDs (Reiser, 2018b). Because IDs are frequently called to "wear different hats as they support or manage various projects" (Nworie, 2022, p. 14), the roles and responsibilities of IDs in HEIs often change daily (Kumar & Ritzhaupt, 2017) and can vary by institution (Nworie, 2022). Their traditional responsibilities in the workplace regularly include course development and improvement, faculty training and communication, project management, formative and summative evaluation, and professional development and research (Beirne & Romanoski, 2018; Kumar & Ritzhaupt, 2017; Nworie, 2022). Accordingly, IDs need to be skilled in collaboration, communication, theoretical knowledge, problem-solving, and course design, among other areas (Magruder et al., 2019). They must also continuously build on their foundation of knowledge through professional development and research practices.

IDs During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic caused IDs to be recognized as "first responders" who had to react quickly to the ERT crisis while simultaneously addressing extant responsibilities (Abramenka-Lachheb et al., 2021). However, Muljana (2021) pointed out that IDs were commonly faced with the types of challenges experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, even before the start of ERT. For instance, instructors frequently need to create an online course with little lead time or no experience designing instruction for an online environment. While this may be the case, IDs also engaged in ancillary tasks outside of their normal purview during ERT (Xie & Rice, 2021), a transference looks to continue in post-pandemic HEI infrastructures. Case in point, in a recent analysis of ID job postings, Nworie (2022) found that HEIs are especially looking for professionals who are skilled at "identifying alternative solutions for delivery of academic coursework" (p. 13).

Methods

This study utilized hermeneutic phenomenology to discover the essence of the lived experiences of IDs as remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic (van Manen, 2017; Valentine et al., 2018). Qualitative researchers often have a high level of interaction with the subject, situations, or groups that are part of the study (Gelling, 2011). We recognize that a critical aspect of hermeneutic phenomenology is interpreting the participants' experiences; therefore, we acknowledge our preconceptions and the ways in which they may influence the interpretation of the study data (Ottenbreit-Leftwich et al., 2010). As Valentine et al. (2018) point out, "the researcher and phenomenon are inextricably linked, and . . . this relationship is invaluable to understanding the phenomenon itself" (p. 463). Therefore, we exploited our experience in the field of instructional design and technology to help guide our understanding of the studied phenomenon while still implementing "bridling as an ongoing activity of restraining one's pre-understandings, . . . allowing the phenomenon to present itself" (Valentine et al., 2018, p. 466). By using a social constructivist framework, we rely on the participants' descriptions of the situation while also acknowledging how our "interpretation flows from [our] own personal, cultural, and historical experiences" (Cresswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24).

Participants and Data Collection

The study sample included six IDs who experienced a move to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were selected from the same HEI to ensure the same phenomena were experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The HEI was a sample of convenience. The study participants met the following inclusion criteria:

1. current or former ID employed in a select public HEI,
2. worked as an ID in higher education throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, defined as March 2020 through May 2021,
3. at least two years of prior experience as an ID in higher education, and
4. did not work remotely prior to the pandemic.

We obtained a list of ID emails from the target institution's website to recruit study participants. All members of the defined population (N = 16) received an email inviting them to complete a short online survey to determine their eligibility for inclusion in the study. Nine (n = 56%) survey responses were received, seven (n = 44%) of which qualified under the inclusion criteria. We contacted the qualifying individuals via email to confirm their willingness to participate in the study and schedule a Zoom interview. Of those contacted, one (n = 14%) did not respond to the scheduling request or follow-up emails; therefore, the representative sample consisted of six (N = 6) participants.

Each interview was scheduled for 90 minutes. The participants were interviewed by two researchers using an interview protocol (Appendix A), with organically generated follow-up questions (Appendix B). The protocol was revised after the first interview to ask all IDs if prior experience had any impact on their WFH experience. Participants consented to an additional follow-up interview if needed; however, following analysis, it was determined that one was not needed. One designated researcher manually reviewed the automated transcriptions of every interview for formatting and accuracy. Then each researcher individually reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. Finally, the transcripts were made available to participants for member checking.

Data Analysis

Data collected through this study was analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Using the IPA method for data analysis ensured a degree of open-mindedness (Alase, 2017). We followed the 6-step process originated by Smith et al. (2009) to analyze the data, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Six-Step Process

Step 1	Individual team members fully immersed themselves in the transcripts, reading and re-reading
Step 2	Individual team members took detailed notes concerning semantics, expressions, and text
Step 3	Team compared individual notes to look for emerging themes
Step 4	Team members reviewed and consolidated key emerging themes together
Step 5	Team repeated Step 4 for each theme
Step 6	Team determined patterns amongst all the themes

The first step in manually analyzing the data was to fully immerse ourselves in the transcripts individually, reading and re-reading each, taking time to reference the actual recordings to ensure accuracy. In step two, each researcher then reviewed the transcripts, making notations that identified specific terms or semantics used by those interviewed. We also considered the context that was being addressed or explained in the response. Clusters of themes were developed in this step by identifying the words, phrases, or topics that each researcher determined were significant; these are often referred to as units of significance (Groenewald, 2004).

The third step consisted of multiple virtual meetings to discuss the units of significance. It was essential to practice bridling to avoid making assumptions based on our experiences. A list of emerging themes was developed with the understanding that this would not be the final list but the starting point for the coding process. Together, the researchers reviewed each line of the transcripts and identified and discussed what theme might best fit the content. Each transcript was reviewed three times as a group to reach a consensus on the assigned themes. No specialized software was employed. From the multiple reviews, a working list of themes was developed, and the transcripts were reviewed one final time by the researchers collectively to ensure accuracy.

Once the review of the transcripts was complete, step four was to sort the units of significance by compiling the specific quotations from each interview into an Excel workbook, where a sheet represented a theme and a column represented one ID's responses. Step five was repeating this process for each theme.

Step six began with reviewing each theme in the Excel workbook. The researchers looked for patterns across the IDs and identified connections to further refine the themes and identify sub-themes. Using the Excel workbook, the researchers began to write the findings. As the findings were being written and reviewed, further revisions were made to some of the themes and sub-themes as the context was analyzed, identifying instances that seemed to converge into a common sentiment. The context was checked to ensure the essence of the participants was accurately portrayed by continuously reviewing the Excel workbook and returning to the original transcripts.

Findings

From the IPA process, several major themes were identified: job responsibilities, work communication, equipment needs, WFH benefits, future work plans, and WFH challenges. Within each of these, there were a variety of sub-themes which are discussed below.

Job Responsibilities

Each interview began with the ID describing their day-to-day work responsibilities before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Most (n = 4, 66.7%) mentioned the specific areas of their university that they support, and all (N = 6) discussed working directly with faculty in various ways, including pedagogical assistance and technical support, as well as their own continuing professional development.

Pedagogical Assistance

All IDs (N = 6) described their work with faculty in the creation of courses. As ID1 explained, they worked "primarily with [faculty's] online courses, but also with using Blackboard in [faculty's] face-to-face courses." In addition to "helping with curriculum" (ID5), ID4 described "serv[ing] as a sounding board for people who are working on improving their classes."

Multiple IDs (n = 3, 50.0%) also talked specifically about the "scramble" (ID4) to prepare faculty for ERT due to COVID-19. ID2 discussed "prepping for it, and reach[ing] out to our faculty, and getting stuff built" before the transition to ERT was made official to "get ahead of it." ID3 described "knowing that […] we had to hit the ground running and getting those courses online." ID4 also provided training for "a lot of instructors that had never taught online before and weren't quite sure what tools to use or how to use them."

ID2 pointed out the importance of supporting faculty, noting that "we work with people so they can be successful and they can work with their students. If we don't support them, their 30 to 100 […] per class students are gonna be up the creek."

Some IDs (n = 2, 33.3%) also described side projects. ID4 mentioned, "help[ing] with Human Resources and developing a lot of their trainings, which is kind of a random side duty."

Technical Support

In addition to pedagogical assistance, multiple IDs (n = 2, 33.3%) described providing troubleshooting assistance to faculty. ID1 described aiding faculty with "stuff they should be calling IT about" but expressed that it was "fine," adding, "That's my job; I help my faculty." All IDs (N = 6) mentioned helping faculty specifically with the Blackboard LMS.

Professional Development

As a final facet of their professional responsibilities, a majority of IDs (n = 5, 83.3%) discussed their ongoing professional development. Specifically, these IDs mentioned attending virtual conferences that may not have been feasible in the past. ID1 said that working remotely "didn't change my overall approach to […] career development or skills development or professional development," while ID2 stated, "I've actually done some more of that because it's working remotely so I am able to do different ones." ID6 mentioned their inability to attend any face-to-face professional development, saying, "anything not remote was out." ID4 brought up the financial aspect, pointing out that "a lot of them became […] free or low cost, so […] attending Blackboard World that I['ve] never been able to attend before, it was just free."

Work Communication

IDs (N = 6) described the methods of communication that they used while working from home. Much of the communication between the IDs, supervisors, and other employees centered around how to do the job with their available resources.

Communication Tools

As ID3 said, “knowing about […] different applications like Zoom and Slack and different forms of communication really helped.” As shown in Table 2, nearly all IDs (n = 5, 83.3%) indicated that communication consisted of an official company email (n = 5, 83.3%), text messages (n = 5, 83.3%), Zoom meetings (n = 5, 83.3%), and Slack (n = 3, 50%), which is a mobile instant messaging tool. ID1 reported the informal use of the Slack channel, describing "a lot of jokes, there's like two channels, and one is for work stuff, and one is for general stuff.” ID3 commented on the work benefits of using Slack, comparing it to casual chatter in the office by saying that “when people are available to answer, having that available has been awesome.” They also said “being able to post, you know, Hey I’ve got this weird thing happening, like, has anyone seen this, what have you done” was a benefit.

ID3 described encouraging faculty to use Zoom before ERT and getting the Zoom Pro Accounts “around the start of the pandemic, and that was actually really helpful.” ID1 described a benefit of using Zoom to meet with faculty, “most of the time, I really needed to see like what they were doing in Blackboard, which I could do on a Zoom call.” ID2 extended the use of Zoom to their personal life by using it to vent with family, saying, “There were a couple of nights where it would be like okay, girlfriend, go get your bottle of wine and get on zoom with me and let’s talk before you lose it.”

ID4 also described meetings with their pod for "talking about work stuff […] like talking about social stuff and complaining about how things are being handled or not being handled.” They went on to describe it as “a safe space to kind of vent a little bit and […] connect with their struggles and frustrations because it was the same struggles and frustrations I was dealing with.”

Table 2

Communication Tools

	ID1	ID2	ID3	ID4	ID5	ID6
Email	X	X	X	X	X	X
Text / Calls	X	X	X	X	X	X
Slack	X		X			X
Zoom Meeting	X	X	X	X	X	X

Communicating the Transitions

All IDs (N = 6) discussed how they learned of the transition to working from home. ID3 responded, "It was, you know, emails, followed by emergency Zoom meetings [and] phone calls." ID5 noted that their supervisor informed them in person, "Oh, they walked in and told us. My supervisor walked in and said we are going to go to full remote and kinda get all your stuff together." Some IDs (n = 2, 33.3%) could not recall the details in how the transition was communicated. For example, ID4 said, "I'm sure I remember official communication from the university at some point, saying we were working remotely. I don't remember." Similarly, ID6 stated, "I don't think it was a surprise when it came through whatever official channel, because I think there's already been chatter, there were concerns." ID1 said that “leadership communicates to us every time they get an update about what any changes will be.” As stated by ID4, "our director gave us information as she could and understood when things weren't clear and when we were kind of like struggling bad. […] They were always available to talk to if we were struggling with anything."

In addition, half of the IDs (n = 3, 50%) used these communication methods to discuss returning to work in the office after ERT ended. ID1 said questions about returning to the office have "been a constant topic of conversation in staff meetings” and that “when it gets communicated to [leaders], they're pretty good about telling it to us.” All IDs (N = 6) noted the possibility of extending the remote work opportunity into permanent WFH or even a hybrid work model. At the time of the interviews, all IDs (N = 6) described needing to request an extension of remote work by filling out a form every six months. ID1 explained that they were told, "You can work from home with department approval on like a rolling six-month thing. […] We'll approve it for any of you." ID6 summed up the process, "you have a form that you have to fill out [to] work remotely, and it's for a six-month period, and I don't believe that started until May or June of 2020."

Equipment Needs

ID5 described their pre-existing WFH setup “with two screens and a fairly, you know, fast computer and good internet.” Other IDs (n = 4, 66.7%) discussed the resources they needed to acquire to complete their job responsibilities in a remote environment. Table 3 details the resources the IDs purchased or requested from their employer to meet their remote needs. ID1 required more than one device, stating that "I have two work laptops at home. […] One works better with, like, the remote connection function." Some of the equipment was purchased to improve communication with faculty, such as ID2 who purchased a new Snowball mic, "so that we can really communicate on the audio" and "had to break down and buy a new [office chair]." ID3 "didn't have a desk" and described working from a kitchen table, explaining that "It really forced me to get [...] my own little space within my house that I could get everything set up, get the technology that I needed."

Table 3

Remote Needs of IDs

	ID1	ID2	ID3	ID4	ID5	ID6
Laptop(s)	IO	IO		PP	PP	IO
High-Resolution Webcam		NP			PP	NP
Desk	NP	NP	NP		PP	NP
Office Chair		NP			PP	NP
Large Monitor		NP			PP	IO/NP
Quality Microphone		NP			PP	NP
Stand / Dock for Laptop		NP				NP
Lighting		NP				

IO: institution owned
NP: new purchase
PP: previous purchase

WFH Benefits

All IDs (N = 6) discussed benefits they discovered while working from home, ranging from personal benefits regarding their commute and WFH wardrobe to professional benefits such as increased productivity and positive views of online learning.

Commute

All IDs (n = 4, 66.7%) discussed their commute, reporting pre-WFH commute times ranging from 30 minutes to an hour each way. Thirty-three percent (n = 2) discussed “the cost savings of not putting the mileage on the car and buying all the gas" (ID1), as well as the recaptured time. ID5 mentioned that it was "so much easier to, you know, get ready for work and then just walk in there." ID6 described how quickly they could get ready, sharing that “getting to the office, that might take me 30-45 minutes to get ready, but just to get ready in front of my computer, I can do that in 10 minutes.” Several IDs (n = 4, 66.7%) discussed spending more time with their children. ID1 said, "I had more time to spend with my wife and kids," and half of the IDs (n = 3, 50%) described being able to pick up or drop off their children due to the lack of a work commute.

Flexibility

IDs (n = 5, 83.3%) expressed gratitude for the flexibility that working from home afforded them. ID3 discussed their ability to accommodate faculty around the world by meeting at unconventional hours, noting that "it was more difficult back when you were stuck to your eight-to-five schedule." ID5 said they were able to "work a little extra if you needed to without having like an extra, you know, worry about traffic or anything."

Flexibility was also discussed in relation to the work environment (n = 4, 66.7%). ID4 discussed their ability to wear more comfortable clothing and shoes. They also mentioned the flexibility to "run downstairs" to do "a little laundry." ID6 similarly mentioned their ability to keep a flexible schedule by working “some hours on Saturdays or Sundays” and fewer hours on some weekdays, adding that “I don’t think that affected my faculty negatively at all.” The flexibility extended to their lunch hour with ID4 saying, "I didn't have to pack a lunch, I could just like go downstairs and microwave something and come back upstairs" and "I can take like my lunch hour and go down and play with [my boys] if I want to and like interact a bit more."

Productivity

Half of the IDs (n = 3, 50%) mentioned their productivity in working from home. ID1 stated that there was no difference in productivity between working in the office and WFH, pointing out that "we do Zooms whenever we need it." ID4 similarly stated that their productivity has not declined. ID5 described how their team was able to spend some extra hours to accomplish their goals: "we all jumped on them, spend some extra hours, got it done."

Online Meeting & Teaching

A final benefit that was mentioned by some IDs (n = 2, 33.3%) related to the online nature of their work with faculty. ID4 said, "I think most of the faculty I work with are comfortable meeting with me like fully remote. I haven't had anybody ask me to come be with them in the office." They further explained the personal benefit by adding, "I am introverted, and so I prefer meeting remotely."

ID2 extended the benefit to the faculty with whom they worked, observing that “the good thing to come out of COVID is we got people to use technology and use new learning methods and ways to deliver things to students […] that are actually better for today’s students.” ID3 explained that they were able to "see the knowledge and the excitement that these faculty are getting now as far as putting yourself online."

Future Work Plans

Most IDs (N = 6) described a mixture of feelings on returning to the office environment. ID1 stated, "I might be sending out resumes" and ID3 said, "we're wanting to stay remote or at least more flexible, and you know, maybe working remote three or four days out of the week and going up to campus […] once or twice a week." All IDs (N = 6) responded that they would have no problem working from home at least some of the time. ID1 said, "We could do it from anywhere, and if we could do it without driving so much, that would be great," and ID2 said, "It got people who said, No, this can never be done remotely online to go oh, wow, we can do this and we can service even more people when we do this this way." ID4 described support from administration to "just have us be listed as remote" and that "I feel like we get better people on our team if we advertise as being remote."

WFH Challenges

Several IDs (n = 3, 50%) described the challenges of switching from in-person to remote work. While they enjoyed working at home, ID3 stated that "it was tough."

Work-Life Balance

One of the challenges mentioned was accommodating others, like family and faculty. ID2 expressed the importance of their role by saying, "if I don't do this, the students no get the worky, no get the learny" while also commenting, "working with my faculty and having babies streak by the back [...] it's balancing the family life and learning how everything goes through." ID3 expressed the need to remind faculty to set these same work-life boundaries with their students, noting that they told faculty, "You have to set your boundaries and let students know that no, you are not available 24/7, and you'll have your response times posted and set in stone." In addition to managing family and faculty, ID2 mentioned their pets, noting that they had to "try to keep the dogs happy, try to keep the cats off the screen."

Isolation

ID1 indicated that "I sometimes feel as though I'm under house arrest being in the house every day" and described missing the interaction involved in working in an office and attending face-to-face conferences, despite adding, "I'll be honest, I didn't get much [interaction] to begin with."

Boundaries

ID3 found setting boundaries the most challenging. They described "getting up early and working all hours of the night." They also reflected on the mental and health impacts of the extended schedules they were experiencing: "it really did not take long to realize the negative effects that were happening from that, not taking the breaks that I needed and feeling like [...] I had to be available 24/7." ID4 mentioned "giv[ing] out my cell phone number" and asking faculty to "just don't call me like at nine o'clock at night." ID2 described setting "an alarm clock to remind me to eat lunch when working from home." ID1 described challenges related to having multiple family members all working or learning from home, "it's like an office park, we'd be here all day."

Pandemic-Specific

The psychological well-being of others during the pandemic also had an impact. ID2 noted that faculty "are overwhelmed, burnt out, and just in that particular mode" and that "I feel like a little bit of a counselor." According to ID2, "We've kind of had to [...] pull all hands-on deck and work those crazy hours and those number of days to get things through."

ID2 went on to explain that more faculty training was explicitly required due to the shift to ERT: "We were doing remote triage learning, not true online learning for the majority of it." They described "try[ing] to get people to understand is that that was a remote experience, not necessarily an online experience."

Discussion

The findings of this study indicated that the sample population of IDs were able to continue their job responsibilities in a WFH environment. Even with the rapid change of instructional design to pivot to ERT (Xie & Rice, 2021), all IDs were able to make the necessary changes to perform their job. The responsibilities before and during the COVID-19 pandemic that sampled IDs described align with the existing research on the role of the ID. Specifically, they all discussed providing pedagogical assistance to the faculty in their assigned areas (Kumar & Ritzhaupt, 2017; Nworie, 2022), ranging from assistance with designing online courses before the COVID-19 pandemic to shifting face-to-face courses to an online format for ERT (Abramenka-Lachheb et al., 2021; Xie & Rice, 2021). IDs interviewed in this study also described helping faculty with online technical support, confirming previous research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which also noted technical support as one facet of IDs acting as "first responders" (Abramenka-Lachheb et al., 2021).

In line with the need for IDs to continue growing and innovating in the field, participating IDs reflected on their ongoing professional development activities, noting in several cases that the WFH environment, coupled with the increased availability of virtual conferences made it easier to acquire professional development hours. Moving forward, this has created an opportunity for additional professional development modalities.

The emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic helped IDs show instructors the benefits of teaching online. Many in the sample reflected that in helping instructors move to ERT, they were accomplishing a similar task to what they had done before by attempting to aid instructors in moving their course materials online (Xie & Rice, 2021). This has opened the opportunity for IDs to help instructors see the possibilities of online learning beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Communication played a critical role in adapting to the WFH environment. Ensuring continuity and flow involves various modes of communication channels (Mose, 2022), and while many indicated they received information, it was not always delivered through the same channels. The IDs had access to email, Slack, and Zoom, as well as direct conversations, but they did not describe a centralized method of communication such as described in previous literature (Keane & May, 2022). Clear communication plans could be implemented in the future to avoid confusion and misinformation.

A positive observation from the sample IDs was how the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption and acceptance of online learning and the associated technologies (Mose, 2002). IDs described a change in the attitudes of faculty about putting themselves and their courses online (Abramenka-Lachheb et al., 2021; Sims & Baker, 2021). IDs noted the importance of differentiating between "remote triage learning" and "true online learning" (ID2), a sentiment often repeated in existing literature (Abramenka-Lachheb et al., 2021; Fuchs, 2022; Hodges & Fowler, 2020; Xie & Rice, 2021).

There were many challenges noted amongst the sample IDs, including setting boundaries and maintaining a respectable work-life balance, which have been widely explored in remote work (Gibson et al., 2002; Parker et al., 2022). Additional commonly reported challenges mentioned in this study included working within the organization's established infrastructure, communicating within the organization, and being able to provide the necessary tools and processes to perform assigned

responsibilities (Aldosari et al., 2022). As IDs remain in WFH environment beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, administrators can build procedures and infrastructure to address these challenges.

A common sentiment across the interviews was that the responsibilities of IDs can be completed in a WFH environment without a loss of productivity. There were some differences in their preferences for work modality and in their perceived benefits and challenges of the WFH environment, but all seemed in agreement that the nature of their position lent itself to the WFH modality. Kim (2022) stated, "If a professor is comfortable teaching online, collaborating with an ID over digital platforms will also feel comfortable." While actual productivity impacts were outside of the scope of this study, the IDs' experiences support the continuation of WFH for IDs.

Conclusion

There are limitations present that should be noted and considered in future research. The sample size was small, and the participants were all from the same HEI, impacting the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the hermeneutic phenomenology method employed can be prone to inaccuracies (De Gagne et al., 2010). The research team may have inadvertently expressed bias in our analysis.

Nevertheless, the results of this study provided insight into the lived experience of IDs who had never worked remotely and were forced to do so during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our analysis suggested that while the participants assimilated well into their new work, HEIs need to consider the framework that was created during ERT and how it can help in designing future work environments. The following is a summary of the key findings from our study:

- The participants in our study reported a number of benefits to working remotely, including increased flexibility, reduced commuting time, and improved work-life balance.
- However, they also reported some challenges, such as difficulty maintaining focus and productivity, and a lack of social interaction.
- Overall, the participants in our study were positive about their experiences working remotely, and they believed that remote work could be a viable option for IDs in the future.

In the same vein, HEI administrators have a responsibility to develop contingency plans to be prepared for future situations. Any new shifts to remote work need to consider the role of the ID as well as the resources and tools needed to effectively perform their assigned tasks. We suggest the following areas for future research:

- how other IDs in public or private HEIs experienced working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- how the resources to create a remote office may affect morale, productivity, and ability to complete the role of an ID remotely;
- what infrastructure improvements may be necessary for the HEIs to prepare for the next instance of ERT;
- how the ID position will be viewed in post-pandemic HEI infrastructures; and
- the benefits of having centralized communication hubs by discipline.

Ultimately, this study has provided valuable insights into the lived experience of IDs who were forced to work remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this study can help inform the future of remote work for IDs in HEIs. By considering the factors that have been outlined, HEIs can create a more supportive and productive work environment for IDs, regardless of their work location.

References

Abdrasheva, D., Escribens, M., Sabzalieva, E., Vieira do Nascimento, D., & Yerovi, C. (2022). Resuming or reforming? Tracking the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education after two years of disruption. UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381749

Abramenka-Lachheb, V., Lachheb, A., Cesar de Siqueira, A., & Huber, L. (2021). Instructional designers as "first responders" helping faculty teach in the coronavirus crisis. Journal of Teaching and Learning with Technology, 10(1), 294-305. https://doi.org/10.14434/jotlt.v10i1.31368

Adkins, C. L., & Premeaux, S. A. (2014). The use of communication technology to manage work-home boundaries. Journal of Behavioral and Applied Management, 15(2), 82-100. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/use-communication-technology-manage-work-home/docview/1503117410/se-2

Alase, A. (2017). The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): A guide to a good qualitative research approach. International Journal of Education & Literacy Studies, 5(4), 9-19. http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.5n.2p.9

Aldosari, A. M., Eid, H. F., & Chen, Y-P. P. (2022). A proposed strategy based on instructional design models through an LMS to develop online learning in higher education considering the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sustainability, 14(13). https://doi.org/10.3390/su14137843

Beirne, E., & Romanoski, M. (2018). Instructional design in higher education: Defining an evolving field [White paper]. OLC.

Chimote, N. K., & Srivastava, V. N. (2013). Work-life balance benefits: From the perspective of organizations and employees. IUP Journal of Management Research, 12(1), 62–73.

Cresswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches (4th ed.). Sage.

Dickson-Deane, C., & Asino, T. (2018, March 27). Don't forget, instructional design is about problem solving. Educause. https://er.educause.edu/blogs/2018/3/dont-forget-instructional-design-is-about-problem-solving

De Gagne, J. C., & Walters, K. J. (2010). The lived experience of online educators: Hermeneutic phenomenology. Journal of Online Learning and Teaching, 6(2), 357-366. https://jolt.merlot.org/vol6no2/degagne_0610.htm

Dennon, A. (2021, February 12). Coronavirus impacts on students and online learning. Best Colleges. https://www.bestcolleges.com/blog/coronavirus-impacts-on-students/

Fuchs, K. (2022, June 02). The difference between emergency remote teaching and e-learning. Frontiers in Education, 7. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.921332

Gartner. (2020). Gartner survey reveals 82% of company leaders plan to allow employees to work remotely some of the time [Press release]. https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2020-07-14-gartner-survey-reveals-82-percent-of-company-leaders-plan-to-allow-employees-to-work-remotely-some-of-the-time

Gelling, L. (2011, January 31). What is the difference between grounded theory and phenomenology? Nursing Times. https://www.nursingtimes.net/roles/nurse-educators/what-is-the-difference-between-grounded-theory-and-phenomenology-31-01-2011/

Gibson, J. W., Blackwell, C. W., Dominicis, P., & Demerath, N. (2002). Telecommuting in the 21st century: Benefits, issues, and a leadership model which will work. The Journal of Leadership Studies, 8(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/107179190200800407

Groenewald, T. (2004). A phenomenological research design illustrated. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 3(1), 42–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690400300104

Hodges, C. B., & Fowler, D. J. (2020). The COVID-19 crisis and faculty members in higher education: From emergency remote teaching to better teaching through reflection. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Perspectives in Higher Education, 5(1), 118-122. https://doi.org/10.32674/jimphe.v5i1.2507

Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T., & Bond, A. (2020, March 27). The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning. EDUCAUSE Review. https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning

Keane, L., & May L. (2022, March 31). A new spin on communications for the post-covid world: How the pandemic shifted leader perspectives on university communications. Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/call-action-marketing-and-communications-higher-education/new-spin-communications-post-covid

Kim, J. (2022, August 9). CHLOE 7: The present and future of instructional design capacity. Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/learning-innovation/chloe-7-present-and-future-instructional-design-capacity

Kumar, S., & Ritzhaupt, A. (2017). What do instructional designers in higher education really do? International Journal on E-Learning, 16(4), 371-393. https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/150980

Magruder, O., Arnold, D. A., Moore, S., & Edwards, M. (2019). What is an ID? A survey study. Online Learning, 23(3), 137–160. http://dx.doi.org/10.24059/olj.v23i3.1546

Mose, P. O. (2022). Instructional design in a time of crisis: Experiences of instructional designers and faculty as 'first responders.' Journal of Educational Technology Systems, 51(1), 5–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/00472395221105901

Muljana, P. S. (2021). Course-designing during the pandemic and post-pandemic by adopting the layers-of-necessity model. TechTrends, 65, 253-255. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-021-00611-x

Nworie, J. (2021, May 19). Beyond COVID-19: What's next for online teaching and learning in higher education? Educause Review. https://er.educause.edu/articles/2021/5/beyond-covid-19-whats-next-for-online-teaching-and-learning-in-higher-education

Nworie, J. (2022). The increasing quest for instructional designers and technologists in higher education and corporate settings. Contemporary Educational Technology, 14(1), ep345. https://doi.org/10.30935/cedtech/11481

Ottenbreit-Leftwich, A. T., Glazewski, K. D., Newby, T. J., & Ertmer, P. A. (2010). Teacher value beliefs associated with using technology: Addressing professional and student needs. Computers and Education, 55, 1321-1335. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2010.06.002

Park, Y., Fritz, C., & Jex, S. M. (2011). Relationships between work-home segmentation and psychological detachment from work: The role of communication technology use at home. Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 16(4), 457-467. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023594

Parker, K., Horowitxz, J. M., & Minkin, R. (2022, February 16). COVID-19 pandemic continues to reshape work in America. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2022/02/16/covid-19-pandemic-continues-to-reshape-work-in-america/

Petherbridge, D., Bartlett, M., White, J., & Chapman, D. (2022). The disruption to the practice of instructional design during COVID-19. The Journal of Applied Instructional Design, 11(2). https://dx.doi.org/10.51869/112/dpmbjwdc

Reiser, R. A. (2018a). What field did you say you were in? In R. A. Reiser & J. V. Dempsey (Eds.), Trends and issues in instructional design and technology (4th ed., pp. 1-7). Pearson.

Reiser, R. A. (2018b). A history of instructional design and technology. In R. A. Reiser & J. V. Dempsey (Eds.), Trends and issues in instructional design and technology (4th ed., pp. 8-22). Pearson.

Shappee, L. (2022, Winter). Instructional designers' roles and the pandemic. C2C Digital Magazine, 9. https://scalar.usc.edu/works/c2c-digital-magazine-fall-2021--winter-2022/instructional-designers-roles

Sims, S. K., & Baker, D. M. (2021). Faculty perceptions of teaching online during the COVID-19 university transition of courses to an online format. Journal of Teaching and Learning with Technology, 10(1). https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2021.638470/full

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research. Sage. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780880903340091

Stahl, A. (2021, February 1). 5 lasting changes to expect in the workplace post-COVID. Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/ashleystahl/2021/02/01/5-lasting-changes-to-expect-in-the-workplace-post-covid

Turner, J., & Baker, M. (2022, June 16). 9 future of work trends post COVID-19. Gartner. https://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/9-future-of-work-trends-post-covid-19

van Manen, M. (2017). Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Valentine, K. D., Kopcha, T. J., & Vagle, M. D. (2018). Phenomenological methodologies in the field of educational communications and technology. TechTrends, 62, 462-472. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-018-0317-2

Xie, J., A, G., & Rice, M. F. (2021). Instructional designers' roles in emergency remote teaching during COVID-19. Distance Education, 42(1), 70-87. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2020.1869526

Xie, J., A, G., Rice, M. F., & Griswold, D. E. (2021). Instructional designers' shifting thinking about supporting teaching during and post-COVID-19. Distance Education, 42(3), 331-351. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2021.1956305

Yang, L., Holtz, D., Jaffe, S., Suri, S., Sinha, S., Weston, J., Joyce, C., Shah, N., Sherman, K., Hecht, B., & Teevan, J. (2022) The effects of remote work on collaboration among information workers. Nature Human Behaviour 6, 43–54. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01196-4

Zito, M., Ingusci, E., Cortese, C. G., Giancaspro, M. L., Manuti, A., Molino, M., Signore, F., & Russo, V. (2021). Does the end justify the means? The role of organizational communication among work-from-home employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18(8), 3933. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18083933

Appendix A – Interview Protocol

1. Can you tell us about your primary duties as an instructional designer?
2. Can you describe your experience transitioning to remote work?
3. How did you find out that you would be working remotely?
4. What was that experience like?
5. Can you describe what your life was like while working remotely?
6. What factors influenced your experience during remote work? (ex: certifications, related PD, prior experience, social groups, institute support)
7. Can you tell us about any current plans to transition back to a physical office or stay in a remote setting?
8. How did your prior experience as an instructional designer affect your transition to remote work?*

*question added after the first interview

Appendix B – Examples of Organic Follow-Up Questions

- When you were face-to-face, you had to travel to get to work? Tell us a little bit about that, and how that's affected you.
- How was moving from what you were doing normally to that different environment, how was that experience for you?
- Is there any situation that you think was unique or an experience you think is important to tell?
- Are there any certifications you had to keep or get?