BEST FEET FORWARD: INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGNERS AS PEDAGOGICAL CONSULTANTS

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I was perhaps more an instructional designer as the English Program chair at the Community Colleges of Colorado Online than I was in my first job under that title. Instructional design has a long history outside of formal education; it's been used by businesses for decades as a scaffold upon which to build skills training for employees. (If you've taken Middlebury's online course "Intersections: Preventing Harassment & Sexual Violence", you've taken a course built by an instructional designer.) For the most part, instructional design in the corporate sector involves building content pages—with some interactivity—that a user can click through before being assessed on what usually equates to reading comprehension.

Instructional design in higher education, and at Middlebury, is different. An instructional designer is not simply a person upon whom a teacher can rely to upload content or answer questions about functionality in the LMS or another digital platform. An instructional designer is a consultant whose background and knowledge extend beyond the technological and into the pedagogical and theoretical.

That's why I say I was more an instructional designer as a program chair than I was when "instructional designer" was my title. As the chair of an entirely online English program, the core of my work revolved around the pedagogical, not the technological. Or, perhaps more accurately, *the pedagogical as it relates to and is inflected by the technological*—the human when it meets the machine. For me, the primary concern of instructional design should not be content nor the interface, but should be the learner, and how the learner will encounter the interface, the computer, the digital.

Seymour Papert, one of the earliest thinkers on computing in education, writing about the capacity for computers and computing to ignite the imagination in students, said:

> Children who grow up with the opportunity to explore the jungles and the cities and the deep oceans and ancient myths and outer space will be even less likely than the players of video games to sit quietly through anything even vaguely resembling the elementary-school curriculum as we have known it up to now! (9)

But he also, presciently, wrote about the computer in institutions of education:

> The shift from a radically subversive instrument in the classroom to a blunted conservative instrument in the computer lab came neither from a lack of knowledge nor from a lack of software. I explain it by an innate intelligence of School, which acted like any living organism in defending itself against a foreign body … Progressive teachers knew very

well how to use the computer for their own ends as an instrument of change; School knew very well how to nip this subversion in the bud. (39-40)

The emphasis on technology at most universities misses the point of bringing together learning and the digital. In many cases, the introduction of digital technology is a placation of those who are yearning for progress, or an inventory that can be listed upon the school web site to evidence that school's progressive outlook on technology. For many institutions, this was the reason to begin to offer MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). Not because there was some real benefit to learners, teachers, or the college, but to keep up with the Joneses. When we reify new pedagogies through technologies that might (but don't often) deliver them, we forget that the most valuable technology in education is people, and their willingness and capacity for invention, discovery, and reinvention.

It can be, somewhat unexpectedly, the work of the instructional designer to discern between digital methodologies and institutional infrastructures that focus on technological use and those which favor the originality and expertise of learners and teachers. This discernment comes by looking through a critical lens at not just a tool—Canvas, Adobe Connect, Google Apps for Education, etc.—but also at the assumptions behind the tool, the pedagogies it has baked in, the intentions of those considering its adoption (from teachers to administrators to academic technologists), and the repercussions or benefits to learning if the tool gets used. The critical instructional designer asks questions about tool choice and use, pedagogical approach, student and teacher preparation, and whether agency—the students' and teacher's—can be preserved and supported by the tool.

And a critical instructional designer, in consultation with an instructor or administrator, must be prepared to offer alternatives to the digital if all these factors cannot be reconciled.

Pedagogy is an agile business, and it is also the demesne of compassionate labor. Without agility and compassion, the management of technological infrastructure doesn't support learning. This is one reason why a project like Domain of One's Own (MiddCreate) is important (see Watters, 2015) —not just because of the impact it has on student agency and digital identity, but because of the way it challenges us to become more flexible in the technology we support, developing processes that respond rather than restrict, that enable rather than limit.

The digital asks us to wreck ourselves upon possibility. Our own best intentions will lead us to create scaffolds for learners, rules for technology use, templates for getting things done on the web. But this is a replication of the worst parts of disciplinarity: it's not professionalism, it's the will to bind the mind to a certain course of thinking. Why would we take the web, lasso it, and put it in a corral? We can learn a lot more, and see more of the world, if we let it take us where it will.

The instructional designer, figured as a consultant, is someone who experiments, learns, tries, learns again… right beside the teacher. They bring an expertise not in "best practices", but in "best questions", "best approaches", and "best feet forward".

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