

21st-Century Instructional Designers: Bridging the Perceptual Gaps between Identity, Practice, Impact and Professional Development

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss instructional designers' current status through a brief discussion of the history of instructional design, comparison of instructional design models, and a presentation of a perspective on how instructional designers cope with their current identity and profession while seeking professional development. In this paper, we identified various reasons for addressing why professional development effort is less than ideal for instructional designers. These include a lack of priority given to professional development at an organization level, budget and funding, individual workload, and departmental visions and priorities. In order to address and overcome these factors, we recommend an instructional designer community of practice within institutions. As the landscape of education is constantly transforming, the designers' field cannot stay static. To respond to all the changes, instructional designers not only need to strive for continuous learning but also to adopt a more collaborative practice, where they can share and exchange ideas and best practices.

Keywords

instructional design, professional development, instructional improvement, instructional innovation

Diseñadores instruccionales del siglo XXI: cruzando las brechas perceptuales entre la identidad, práctica, impacto y desarrollo profesional

Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es debatir sobre el estatus de los diseñadores instruccionales a través de un breve comentario sobre la historia del diseño instruccional, la comparación de los modelos de diseño instruccional y una presentación sobre la perspectiva de cómo los diseñadores instruccionales afrontan su identidad actual y su profesión, mientras buscan su desarrollo profesional. En este artículo hemos identificado varias razones para determinar por qué el esfuerzo de desarrollo profesional no es ideal para los diseñadores instruccionales. Estas razones incluyen una falta de prioridad que se da al desarrollo profesional a un nivel organizacional, el presupuesto y la financiación, la carga de trabajo individual y visiones y prioridades departamentales. Para hacer frente y superar estos factores, recomendamos una comunidad de práctica de diseñadores instruccionales dentro de las instituciones. Como el panorama de educación está cambiando constantemente, el área de diseñadores no se puede quedar estática. Para poder responder a todos los cambios, los diseñadores instruccionales no solo necesitan esforzarse en su aprendizaje continuo, también necesitan adoptar una práctica de mayor colaboración, mediante la que pueden compartir e intercambiar ideas y mejorar prácticas.

Palabras clave

diseño instruccional, desarrollo profesional, mejora de la enseñanza, innovación de la enseñanza

Introduction

The 21st century poses a challenge to educators—including instructional designers—as learners' attitudes toward learning and technology evolve at a very fast pace. There are many examples in the literature that discuss who instructional designers are, what they do as professionals, what kind of instructional design model they use, and what kind of challenges they regularly face (Cox & Osguthorpe, 2003; Gibbons, 2003; Gibby, Quiros, Demps, & Liu, 2002; Rowland, 1992; Schwier, Hill, Wager, & Spector, 2006). The purpose of this paper is to examine instructional designers' current status through a brief discussion of the history of instructional design, comparison of instructional design models, and a presentation of a perspective on how instructional designers cope with their current identity and profession while seeking professional development. This paper aims to provide a perspective from designers for designers.

While there have been many discussions on how instructional designers need to be trained for the field, there is limited literature on what they need to be trained on and how they need to continue their professional development. Cheong, Wettasinghe, and Murphy (2006) broadly discuss the shift of education systems and assert that designers should not remain stagnant in their thinking and need to continue learning on a regular basis. Professional development for instructional designers is also clearly stated and emphasized as a competency for designers by the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance, and Instruction, which states "Apply research and theory to the discipline of instructional design and update and improve knowledge, skills, and attitudes pertaining to instructional design process and related field" (International Board of Standards for Training, Performance, and Instruction, 2012). The following sections will focus on instructional designers, the models and challenges, and the possible solutions.

Who is an Instructional Designer?

Richey, Fields, and Foxon (2001) specify four roles for the instructional designer: analyst, evaluator, e-learning specialist, and project manager. The position has been compared to different professions, such as film directors (Gibby et al., 2002) and architects and structural engineers (Gibbons, 2003), in a sense, to use the best available tools and technologies in different layers and phases of instructional design in order to attract and engage more clients. In recent years, instructional designers have been referred to as an "agent of social change" (Schwier et al., 2006) and "civic-minded professionals" (Yusop & Correia, 2012). The profession takes on different titles in different parts of the world or even within the same institution.

Definition and History of Instructional Design

The term "instructional design" has been interpreted in various ways based on grounded theories or for practical reasons. The various terms and definitions are overarched by the common theme of teaching and learning, but these un-unified concepts sometimes confuse instructional designers and hinder the fostering of an understanding and interpretation of the crucial issues and foundations related to instructional design. Furthermore, the constantly shifting landscape of education demands design that can grow and change with its context. Therefore, key elements

of instructional design can be overlooked or even ignored by groups owing to a lack of knowledge or context (Levy, 2003).

Different terms have been used to represent the field of instructional design. Shrock (1995) used “instructional development” as a broader context for her description of the history of the field. To Shrock, instructional development is a self-correcting systems approach that seeks to apply scientifically derived principles to the planning, design, creation, implementation, and evaluation of effective and efficient instruction. This umbrella definition encompasses a wide range of concepts open to interpretation in different ways in different instructional design models. Instructional design includes all the processes involved in optimizing learning and performance (Reiser, 2001a). The following descriptions incorporate the overall history of instructional development and learning theories.

Although instructional design has roots in the study of educational psychology, the relevance of instructional design was established during and after World War II with the huge success of the incorporation of training films in the United States Army Air Force (Reiser, 2001b). Skinner (1954) introduced behaviorist principles of learning in his publication, *The Science of Learning and the Art of Teaching*. The key element of his theory lies in the reinforcement of desired learner responses. His instructional design emphasized formulating behavioral objectives, breaking instructional content into small units, and rewarding correct responses early and often. Another famous instructional theorist was Bloom. In 1956, he led a committee that introduced a taxonomy of educational objectives (Bloom, 1956). According to Clark (1999), the taxonomy provided instructors with a means to decide how to impart instructional content to learners most effectively. However, during these times, a standardized design process had yet to be devised.

Gagné (1965) elaborated the analysis of learning objectives and the relationship between different classes of learning objectives and appropriate instructional designs. Due to the advent of the instructional application of microcomputers, the utilization of instructional development by agencies outside of the educational sector, such as military training, business, industry, and even consumer products (educational video games) grew in the 1980s. Merrill, Li, and Jones (1991) claimed that it was necessary to develop new models of instructional design to accommodate the interactive capabilities of the new computer.

In the 1990s, with the influence of the technology movement, constructivist approaches encouraged learners to construct their understanding and meaning of reality and experiences. Dick (1996) and Lebow (1993) tried to see how constructivist principles could enhance instructional design practice. Also, the use of the Internet for distance learning led instructional designers to consider how online courses could be carefully designed within the new environment.

The advent of new media in the 21st century has brought about technological innovations coupled with new ways of approaching learning and instruction. Owing to the divergent and complex nature of the instructional design process and practice, the field of instructional design seems to be growing more general or, conversely, more specific. The different roles that instructional designers play under the name of the instructional design field depend on institutional, organizational strategic plans and instructional designers’ personal levels of expertise. Looking at what is happening in the field of instructional design today raises many questions. Merrill (1996) distinguished the new paradigm of instructional theories from the old paradigm by emphasizing the user–designer concept. In the same vein, Sahin (2009) introduced postmodern instructional design principles (plurality, flexibility, and humanity) to respond to 21st-century learners’ needs and preferences.

The 21st century requires more diverse and holistic learning skills than ever before due to the global paradigm shift in the technological, social, economic, and cultural context. What must now be considered is a new instructional design paradigm to help learners cope with these 21st-century demands. Instructional designers need to be flexible and creative to respond to the demands of this continually changing professional context.

In the next section, we will discuss different instructional design models and will briefly compare them with the Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation (ADDIE) model. These comparisons will help to argue why we believe instructional design models need to be more flexible in this evolving field and why the designers' field cannot stay static.

Instructional Design Models

Instructional design models provide guidelines or frameworks that help to organize structures of procedures in designing and developing instructional activities. From a designer's perspective, various models can be used in the instructional design process only to the extent that is manageable for the particular subject and context. In other words, one model may be more effective for designing a dentistry course, and another model for designing a math course. The aim of this paper is not to determine which model is better but rather to explore some of these models and find links among them through an instructional designer's lens as they impact designers' work and approach.

There are numerous instructional design models (e.g., Dick and Carey, Kemp, ASSURE, and Rapid Prototyping), which are all somehow variations of the traditional ADDIE model (Culatta, 2011). Why the ADDIE model? This is not a foreign concept or question for those in the field of instructional design. While there is still some confusion on the focus of the field, ADDIE seems to be the most recognized model or colloquial term for instructional development among Instructional Design and Technology (IDT) professionals (Bichelmeyer, 2005). Molenda (2003) argues that ADDIE might not even be a model but rather a label covering instructional development processes in a systematic approach. Each of the phase outcomes of ADDIE leads into the subsequent stage. In the analysis phase, target learners, learners' existing knowledge, the learning environment, and instructional problems and objectives are identified. In the design phase, which is systematic and specific, learning objectives, assignments, lessons, and media are developed and selected. In the development phase, the content is developed and proper technologies are used. In the implementation phase, instructor(s) and learners are trained in learning environments and other technologies used in the course. The evaluation phase is reiterative throughout the process in formative forms, and at the end of the development process the evaluation is summative in the form of learners' feedback.

The Dick and Carey design model details a comprehensive and detailed process of Instructional System Design (ISD) that starts by identifying instructional goals and ends with a summative evaluation (Lee & Lee, 1996). In this model, the instructional development process happens within nine phases. The sequential steps in this design (Dick, Carey, & Carey, 2001) are as follows: (1) assess needs to identify goal(s), (2) conduct instructional analysis and analyze learners and context, (3) write performance activities, (4) develop assessment instruments, (5) develop instructional strategy, (6) develop and select instructional materials, (7) design and conduct formative evaluations, (8) revise instruction, and (9) design and conduct summative evaluation. The analysis phase in ADDIE is similar to the first two phases of this model. The write performance objectives phase in Dick and Carey's model is similar to

the development stage in ADDIE, while the evaluation step in both models covers the same thing. This model is also a systematic model.

The Kemp design is similar to Dick and Carey's in that it consists of nine steps, starting with identifying instructional problems and ending with an evaluation process. The model strongly emphasizes learners' characteristics as well as resources to support instruction and learning activities (Morrison, Ross, & Kemp, 2010). The nine elements of the model listed in Morisson, Ross, and Kemp (2004) are (1) identify instructional problems, (2) identify learners characteristic, (3) analyze tasks, (4) design instructional objectives, (5) design content sequencing, (6) design instructional strategies, (7) design the message, (8) develop instruction, and (9) develop evaluation instruments.

The Rapid Prototyping model is inspired by software development (Grant, 2010). The model is used to develop instructional materials in a design–evaluation cycle that continues throughout the life of the project. The model cycle is not as detailed as ADDIE; however, its continual design–evaluation cycle has sometimes been cited as a way to improve the generic ADDIE model (Learning-Theories.com, 2012). The Rapid Prototyping model consists of three steps: (1) prototype, (2) review, and (3) refine. This model reduces costs and time by using a working model early in a project to reduce revisions later. The designer using this model gathers information through needs analysis and setting goals, then constructs and uses a prototype, and finally refines and maintains the design (Camm, 2012).

ASSURE is another ISD model, ASSURE is an acronym taken from the tasks associated with the model and consists of (A) analyze learners, (S) state standards and objectives, (S) select strategies, technology, media, and material, (U) utilize technology, media, and materials, (R) require learner participation, and (E) evaluate and revise (Academy of Teaching Excellence, 2002; Culatta, 2011). Similar to ADDIE, this model starts with analyzing learners and ends with evaluation and revisions.

Within the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology context at the University of British Columbia, there are five main design and development processes: Planning, Development, Production, Implementation, and Evaluation (PDPIE) (Cho & Cronk, 2007). This design model is quite close to the hybrid design model proposed by Passerini and Granger (2000), which also has five phases – analysis, design, development, evaluation, and delivery. While the PDPIE design is not the same as that of the ADDIE model, it is similar in some respects. The first phase of the PDPIE model calls for conducting a needs analysis, which covers learners' characteristics and instructional goals. In the second phase, the main content and the assessment and instructional strategies are determined and developed. In the production phase, the content is finalized and developed online. The implementation phase covers facilitators' training, delivery, learners' support, and resources. Finally, the last phase, similar to that of ADDIE, covers evaluation in both the formative and summative formats.

The comparison between ADDIE and other models is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of the ADDIE model with other instructional design models

THE INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN MODELS' STEPS	ADDIE MODEL PHASES					
		<i>Analysis</i>	<i>Design</i>	<i>Develop</i>	<i>Implement</i>	<i>Evaluation</i>
	Dick and Carey	Needs assessment to identify goals, instructional analysis, analyze learners and context	Develop instructional strategy, develop and select instructional materials, design formative evaluation, revise instruction	Write performance activities, develop assessment instruments, develop instructional strategy, revise instruction	Develop and select instructional materials	Conduct formative evaluation, design/ conduct summative evaluation
	Kemp	Analysis of instructional problems, learner characteristics and task	Develop and design instructional strategies, design content sequencing, and design the message, design of evaluation instruments	Development of instructions	Instructional delivery and implementation, support services	Formative, confirmative and summative evaluation
	Rapid Prototyping	Information gathering	Setting objectives, construct prototype, refine	Construct prototype	Use prototype	Review
	ASSURE	Analyze learners	State standards and objectives, select strategies, technology, media and materials	Utilize technology, media and materials	Require learner participation	Evaluate and revise
PDPIE	Planning	Development	Production	Implementation	Evaluation	

Although considered the standard, a key question is whether the ADDIE model can remain so in the 21st century. The implementation phase of the classic ADDIE may now not be necessary in the development process due to the need for immediate delivery of content. A wide variety of available tools now allows educators to distribute and deliver content immediately. The focus of instructional design will continue to evolve to meet the various needs that contemporary educators and learners demand. Instructional designers, therefore, will follow different models based on their particular needs, situations, and tasks. This section also demonstrates that there is not a fixed model to follow but various models to respond to different teaching and learning demands in an evolving field. With a foundation of what instructional design is, and various models for implementation, we will now explore instructional designers' challenges.

Instructional Designers' Challenges

We are instructional designers who work in the same department/unit, and we have realized that we exercise different skill sets and have different experiences in our day-to-day instructional design practice due to a great variety and ambiguity in what we practice. Because of our realization, we naturally became curious about how other instructional designers see themselves as instructional designers and what challenges they face.

Method

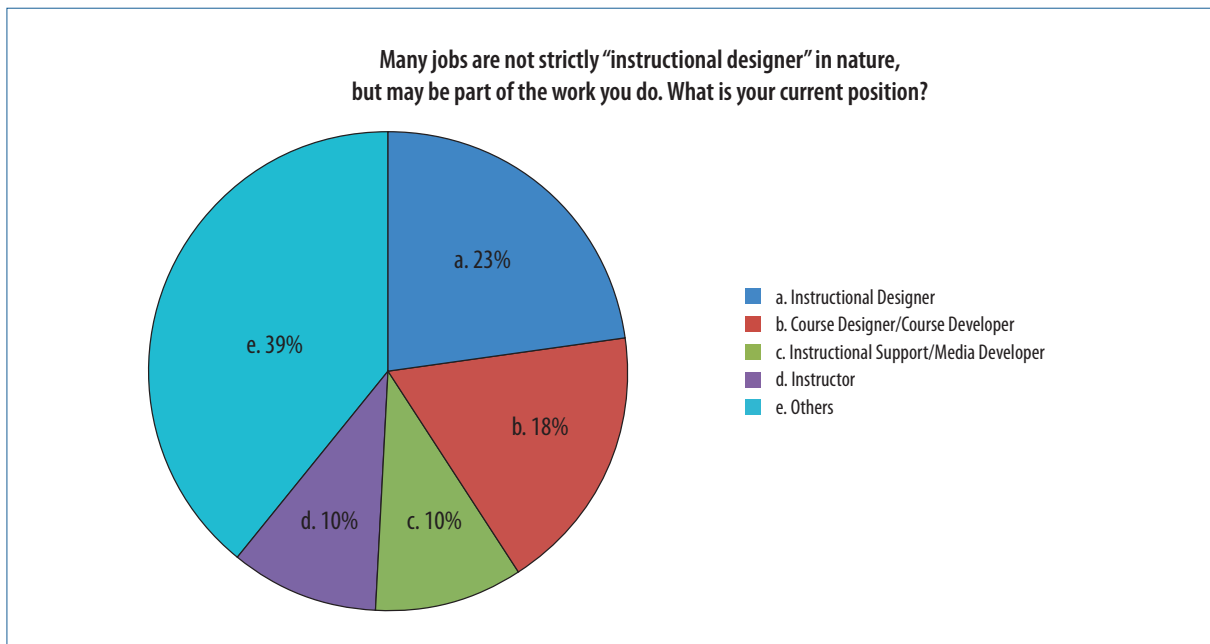
In May 2011, we conducted a brief survey at an event called “Just Instructional Design” in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. The event took place with 60 participants. It was open to all professionals from public schools or private companies who were either instructional designers or were involved in the instructional design process. The survey provides an overview of the professionals who consider themselves involved in instructional design, the general public’s perceptions of the role of an instructional designer, and the challenges that instructional designers face. Thirty-five participants completed the instructional designer’s survey.

A. Identity and the Nature of our Actual Practice

To identify professionals involved in instructional design, albeit under different titles, one question asked was “Many jobs are not strictly ‘instructional designer’ in nature, but may be part of the work you do. What is your current position?” Figure 1 gives the distribution of answers to this question.

Results

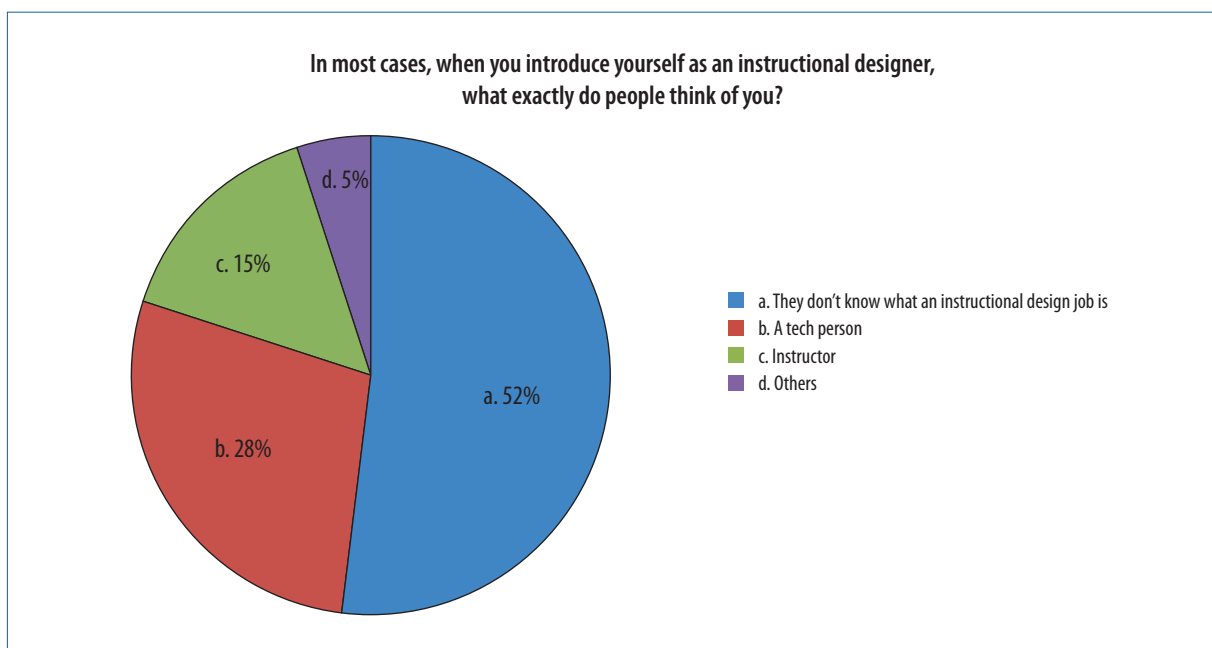
Figure 1. Respondents’ current positions



Only 23% of the instructional designers surveyed self-identified as being primarily instructional designers, as shown in Figure 1. Most considered themselves course designers/developers, instructional support/media developers, instructors, and other roles first and foremost. While many of the respondents’ titles/positions were different from that of instructional designer, most of the positions carried similar responsibilities to those of instructional designers. These titles include learning designer, project manager, educational consultant, instructional development consultant, education program designer, educational analyst, manager (facilitation and

process design), educational technology manager, meta designer, faculty learning management systems training coordinator, administrator, curriculum developer, facilitator, program manager, learning consultant, and educational technology specialist. This clearly demonstrates that many educators under different titles consider themselves significantly involved in the instructional design process and have a common understanding and knowledge of it. The nebulous perceptions of instructional design are found not only among instructional designers themselves but also among the general public. To understand the ambiguity of the position among people, another question asked was “In most cases, when you introduce yourself as an instructional designer, what exactly do people think of you?” See Figure 2 for the answers to this question.

Figure 2. What people think of instructional designers



According to the survey, 52% of the instructional designers surveyed responded that most people they introduce themselves to are not aware of what instructional design entails. Once they introduce themselves as an instructional designer, most claimed that people think of them as a “tech” person or an instructor, as shown in Figure 2.

According to Reiser (2001a), instructional design was not recognized as its own field until the 1960s, and its relative novelty leaves many instructional designers shrouded in obscurity. As a result, the role of an instructional designer is vague. The poorly informed perceptions of instructional designers could pose challenges to their identities; in some cases, the unclear roles may negatively impact the status of instructional designers in the workplace. A significant amount of literature in the field of instructional design has raised and discussed the questions and concerns about “who we are” and “what we do as professionals” (Cox & Osguthorpe, 2003; Gibbons, 2003; Gibby et al., 2002; Rowland, 1992; Schwier et al., 2006). The results of our survey confirm that these questions are still unanswered and that the role of an instructional designer is still not well defined.

While instructional designers are still struggling with their identity and job titles, examining the nature of our actual practice has become another interesting question to explore in our field. Recent researchers have taken

different approaches to respond to this question; some focus on “how instructional designers practice” (Cox & Osguthorpe, 2003; Gibbons, 2003; Rowland, 1992) and others focus on “why they practice” (Schwier et al., 2006).

Identifying different titles such as instructional designers, technology coordinators, educational technology specialist, curriculum consultant, training managers, educational researchers, university professors, advisors, and consultants, Schwier et al. (2006) demonstrate that instructional designers’ primary concern should not be their identity. They emphasize that instructional designers have multiple identities, multiple roles, and are involved in a multitude of activities. They warn instructional designers to “avoid the ‘ticky-tacky’ nature of rigidly imposed standard solutions and approaches, as Malvina Reynolds reminds us” (Schwier et al., 2006, p. 15).

In their research, which clearly focuses on why instructional designers practice rather than how they practice, Schwier et al. (2006) interviewed 25 instructional designers, mostly from Canada, and found that instructional designers may be acting as agents of social change more than they realize. They explain the confusion about why people come to instructional designers only as an afterthought as being because the understanding of instructional designers “grand purpose” (p. 4) is not shared and instructional designers see themselves as just key participants rather than leaders.

Inouye, Merrill, and Swan (2005) invite the discipline and its profession to consider “help” (p. 14) as a new alternative for the central concern of IDT. They further explain that having help at the center of our profession affects what we are and what we do and know as professionals.

In a recent publication, Yusop and Correia (2012) gave instructional design and its nature a new perspective by introducing instructional designers as civic-minded professionals. They contended that instructional designers contribute to positive social change through their design work and by engaging in social relationships and communications with clients who require their services.

In the preceding paragraphs, we have explored and answered the identity and nature of our practice questions by offering a synthesis of the variety of relevant literature in existence.

B. Training for the Job vs the Real-World Situation

There seems to be a consensus among professionals in this field that there is a discrepancy between the way instructional design is taught and is practiced in real-world situations. A significant amount of recent instructional design literature indicates differences in competency requirements as well as positions in various sectors and workplaces with respect to the organizational culture (Cox & Osguthorpe, 2003; Larson & Lockee, 2009). Larson and Lockee (2009) give an example that skills such as gap analysis and cost–benefit analysis are not seen commonly in job advertisements for higher education positions.

To respond to these differences, many IDT professionals and faculty have emphasized the inclusion of real-world, relevant, and authentic experience in different workplace environments in their programs and training. Flexibility, workplace cultural preparation, internships, and assistantships were considered as other techniques and strategies to be offered in these programs to get instructional designers ready for real-world situations (Larson & Lockee, 2009, p. 16).

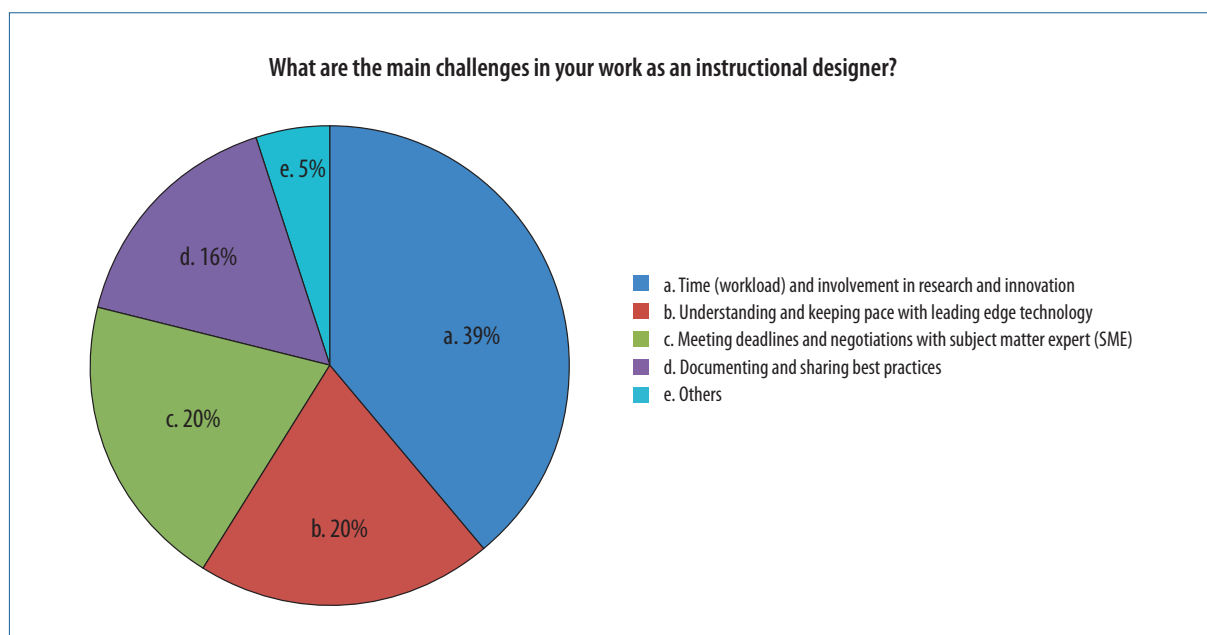
While instructional designers have been concerned with catching up with technology, they seem to have forgotten about the main purpose of their profession. Yusop and Correia (2012) stress how recent publications support the idea that most current training prepares designers to be technically competent, which undermines their transformative power to initiate social change. They explain that recent approaches are also model-centric

(Gibbons, 2003) and so fail to address the broader scope of instructional design knowledge. They stress that designers should be trained to be active contributors in improving public life or the civic aspect of their profession. Therefore, they propose applying civic professionalism in IDT training to prepare instructional designers to be socially aware and technically competent in performing their job. They introduce a new conceptual framework to the field called the civic-minded instructional design framework by adapting Kaufman’s organizational elements model to explain three levels of organizational planning. Within this framework, they explain that a professional civic-minded instructional designer functions at three different context levels: micro, macro, and mega. They also identify four major characteristics of a civic-minded instructional designer, building on Hatcher’s categorization of characteristics of a civic-minded professional (Yusop & Correia, 2012, p. 186). These major components are belief, knowledge, skills, and dispositions. They conclude that a lack of focus on educating designers to be active contributors to improving public life is evident, and they call upon educators and academics to include and emphasize the civic aspect of the IDT profession in their training.

The literature discussed above has stressed the social and civic-related skills of this profession, which needs to improve every day as society evolves and clients’ demands change. Many educators in the field have emphasized how instructional designers should develop themselves professionally so that they can confidently respond to design challenges. Cheong et al. (2006), for example, encourage life-long learning habits for instructional designers. While the importance of ongoing professional development for designers is evident, there are different views and discussions on the topic. In reality, professional development does not occur regularly. Cheong et al. (2006) identify two reasons that explain why the effort of professional development is less than ideal for instructional designers. One is the lack of priority given to professional development at an organization level, and the other is budget and funding.

To explore professional development and designers’ challenges, we asked the question in our survey, “What are the main challenges in your work as an instructional designer?” More than 20% of the respondents considered workload/time as one of the main challenges holding them back from being more involved in innovation and research.

Figure 3. Main challenges of instructional designers



In addition to the two reasons identified by Cheong et al. (2006), we argue that individual workloads as well as departmental visions and priorities are also affecting the professional development of designers. The results of our survey support the idea that workload is one of the challenges that might distance designers from proper professional development. Our own experiences as instructional designers practicing in the field for more than 10 years also indicate that, in some cases, despite having a professional development plan, our training and professional development can go off track/plan because of departments' priorities.

Discussion and Conclusions

Instructional design is a dynamic and fluid field. Its relative infancy as a recognized and distinct area of study and application even makes it amorphous at times. This paper explored the challenges that stem from this status. The ongoing shifts and evolution of the field force instructional designers to constantly adapt and evolve with it. This is a challenge in itself, but more importantly, it breeds further issues of identity-related uncertainties, inconsistent industry standards, and maintenance of mastery in one's field. These topics should be addressed in both a short-term and a long-term manner to optimize the instructional designer's role. In the short term, the main requirement is mainly to act immediately on the rapid growth and development of the field, while in the long term, progress must be continually maintained in an ever-changing role.

One of the biggest themes discussed here was "a lack of consistency". A lack of consistency in the expectations and identity of instructional designers makes it extremely difficult to attain consistency in industry standards. This, of course, breeds uncertainty as to how training can be standardized and practical; as a result of this lack of consistency, many instructional designers may feel confused as to how they can best perform their role in the workplace. Moreover, the position requires constant training and professional development; however, due to lack of time, heavy workload and other factors, designers may not be able to get adequate training.

Due to the evolving nature of this field, standardizing training and encouraging professional development are not simple tasks. How can designers be sufficiently trained to adapt to a non-static landscape while maintaining the depth of knowledge and expertise to make valuable contributions in practice? Professional development needs continuous collaboration to be as dynamic as the domain of instructional design is, with emphasis on constant analysis and refinement. Professional development needs to prepare designers not for a single role but a multitude of roles. Preparing instructional designers for their work should be aligned with the nature of their work, which is innovative and never stagnant. Creating a community of practice might be a simple solution to designers' challenges in an institution. We, along with other instructional designers at the University of British Columbia, have developed a community of practice to support each other in the field of instructional design and practice. The community members meet every six weeks to discuss and resolve a design challenge as a team, share best practices, discuss recent instructional design literature and innovations, explore new technologies and tools, and we invite guest speakers. This community and system of collaboration allows for the enhancement of our professional development and is a good opportunity to discuss our challenges and resolve them as a team. However, further research on whether a community of practice actually advances instructional designers' professional development is needed.

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