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What Is This Thing Called Instructional Design?

Ellen Wagner

Editor's Note

The following is an excerpt from Ellen Wagner's article entitled "In Search of the Secret Handshakes of Instructional Design," published in the [Journal of Applied Instructional Design](). The title for this chapter comes from a portion of Wagner's essay to better represent the portion of her article that is republished here.

Wagner, E. (2011). [Essay: In search of the secret handshakes of ID](). *The Journal of Applied Instructional Design, 1*(1), 33–37.

Foundations of Learning and Instructional Design Technology

Practitioners and scholars working in the professions clustered near the intersection of learning and technology have struggled to clearly and precisely define our practice for a long time—almost as long as technologies have been used to facilitate the creation, production, distribution, delivery and management of education and training experiences.

As a professional group, instructional designers—IDs—often bemoan the fact that it is hard to tell "civilians" what it is that we actually do for a living. Ironically this inability to clearly describe our work is one of the "secret handshakes" that unites us in our quest to better define our professional identity.

One of my favorite examples of this definitional challenge was described in a recent blog post by Cammy Bean, vice-president of learning for Kineo, a multinational elearning production company:

> You're at a playground and you start talking to the mom sitting on the bench next to you. Eventually, she asks you what you do for work. What do you say? Are you met with comprehension or blank stares? This was me yesterday:
>
> Playground Mom: So, what do you do?
>
> Me: I'm an instructional designer. I create eLearning.
>
> Playground Mom: [blank stare]
>
> Me: …corporate training…

> Playground Mom: [weak smile]
>
> Me: I create training for companies that's delivered on the computer....
>
> Playground Mom: weak nod..."Oh, I see."
>
> I see that she really doesn't see and I just don't have the energy to go further. I'm sort of distracted by the naked boy who just ran by (not mine). We move on.
>
> Is it me? Is it the rest of the world? http://cammybean.kineo.com/2009/05/describing-w hatyou-do-instructional.html

AECT has actively supported work on the definitions of big overarching constructs that offer people working at the intersections of learning and technology with a sense of identity, purpose and direction. Lowenthal and Wilson (2007) have noted that AECT has offered definitions in 1963, 1972, 1977, 1994, and 2008 to serve as a conceptual foundation for theory and practice guiding "The Field." But they wryly observe that our definitional boundaries can be a bit fluid. For example, after years of describing what we do as "educational technology," Seels and Richey (1994) made a case for using the term "instructional technology" as the foundational, definitional descriptor. Januszewski and Molenda (2008) returned us to the term "educational technology" as being broader and more inclusive. All seemed to agree that the terms educational technology and instructional technology are often used

interchangeably. In discussing these implications for academic programs, Persichitte (2008) suggested that labels—at least the label of educational technology or instructional technology—do not seem to matter very much. And yet, I wonder—without precision—do we not contribute to the confusion about what it is that people like us actually do?

And what about this thing we do called instructional design? That seems to be an even harder domain to adequately define and describe. A definition of instructional design offered by the University of Michigan (Berger and Kaw, 1996) named instructional design as one of two components (the other being instructional development) that together constitute the domain of instructional technology. Instructional design was then further described in the following four ways:

Instructional Design-as-Process: Instructional Design is the systematic development of instructional specifications using learning and instructional theory to ensure the quality of instruction. It is the entire process of analysis of learning needs and goals and the development of a delivery system to meet those needs. It includes development of instructional materials and activities; and tryout and evaluation of all instruction and learner activities.

Instructional Design-as-Discipline: Instructional Design is that branch of knowledge concerned with research and theory about instructional strategies and the process for developing and implementing those strategies.

Instructional Design-as-Science: Instructional design is the science of creating detailed specifications for the development,

implementation, evaluation, and maintenance of situations that facilitate the learning of both large and small units of subject matter at all levels of complexity.

Instructional Design as Reality: Instructional design can start at any point in the design process. Often a glimmer of an idea is developed to give the core of an instruction situation. By the time the entire process is done the designer looks back and she or he checks to see that all parts of the "science" have been taken into account. Then the entire process is written up as if it occurred in a systematic fashion. http://edtechbooks.org/-Lj

Ten years later, Reiser & Dempsey (2007) defined instructional design as a "systematic process that is employed to develop education and training programs in a consistent and reliable fashion" (pg. 11). They noted that instructional technology is creative and active, a system of interrelated elements that depend on one another to be most effective. They suggested that instructional design is dynamic and cybernetic, meaning that the elements can be changed and communicate or work together easily. They posited that characteristics of interdependent, synergistic, dynamic, and cybernetic are needed in order to have an effective instructional design process. In their view, instructional design is centered on the learned, is oriented on a central goal, includes meaningful performance, includes a measurable outcome, is self-correcting and empirical, and is a collaborative effort. They concluded that instructional design includes the steps of analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation of the instructional design.

Continue reading [Wagner's essay on JAID's website.](#)

Application Exercises

- Write a brief description of a real-world example of instructional design as a process, a discipline, a science, and/or a reality.
- Think of a time you were involved in the instructional design either as a teacher or learner. How did you work through each of these pieces? 1. Centers on the learner 2. oriented on central goal 3. includes meaningful performance & measurable outcome 4. self-correcting and empirical 5. collaborative

⬛ Please complete this short survey to provide feedback on this chapter: http://bit.ly/WhatIsID

Suggested Citation

Wagner, E. (2018). What Is This Thing Called Instructional Design?. In R. E. West, *Foundations of Learning and Instructional Design Technology: The Past, Present, and Future of Learning and Instructional Design Technology*. EdTechBooks.org. Retrieved from http://edtechbooks.org/lidtfoundations/what_is_instructional_design

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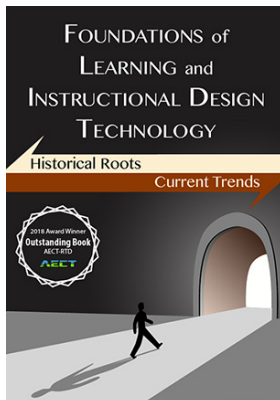
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West, R. E. (2018). *Foundations of Learning and Instructional Design Technology* (1st ed.). EdTech Books. Retrieved from http://edtechbooks.org/lidtfoundations