

Chapter IV

Instructional Designers on the Borderline: Brokering Across Communities of Practice

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Abstract

This chapter examines the unique role of instructional designers within the university setting, particularly when their knowledge is combined with leadership positions to broker across communities of practice. In their role as brokers, they coordinate multi-disciplinary projects and collaborations that foster connections across communities of practice, acting effectively as language translators. The instructional designer has an influential position in an organisation when they can utilise their multi-disciplinary perspective to create new possibilities for innovative design and professional development. This borderline position needs to be carefully managed as it is a precarious balance between being accepted as a change agent, and being ineffective. This chapter will outline a case study that examines the role of an instructional designer in influencing institutional change through the introduction of blended learning.

Introduction

Instructional designers have a unique professional role as they apply their knowledge and skills to the improvement of teaching and learning in many different disciplines. Within the university context these disciplines may include medicine, nursing, dentistry, law and education. Instructional designers may be involved in a range of activities, from focusing on individual projects through to leading major faculty-wide and institution-wide initiatives. For instance, Mitchell, Keppell, and Johnston (2005) designed a multimedia module to advance the practice of preparing children and families for hospitalisation. At a higher level, Keppell (2002) discussed the development of multimedia programs that were used to complement a problem-based learning curriculum in a health sciences faculty. This chapter will focus on an institution-wide initiative that introduces blended learning in a university context.

Instructional designers have enormous potential to influence the policy and practices of university institutions, because they have a unique position within the institution. This unique position may include institution-wide roles such as professional developers and centre directors who focus on enhancing teaching and learning, or enhancing the capability of academic staff. These concepts of change-management and agency of change are also reflected in the research literature. For instance, there has been a recent trend to focus on the change-agent role of the instructional designer within organizations, as opposed to specific instructional design models (Schwier, Campbell, & Kenny, 2004). Schwier, Campbell, and Kenny (2004) also suggest that instructional designers have the potential to transform the institution in which they work through their professional practice. The ability to transform professional practice has implications for both the current and future roles of instructional designers. This chapter examines how instructional designers can influence organizational change, particularly when they hold leadership positions within an institution. As the director of three educational technology centres over the last 12 years, the author has been at the forefront of instigating change across and within institutions.

The author will document how instructional designers act as change agents in the university through the process of *brokering* (Wenger, 1998). Instructional designers may be able to broker across faculty and departmental communities to develop innovative practice in professional settings. By acting as brokers, instructional designers translate between different communities of practice—in a way similar to a language translator—and coordinate multi-disciplinary projects that foster connections across and within communities of practice. As a “border dweller,” the instructional designer has a unique vantage point that may allow new possibilities for innovative design and professional development, and allow for the transformation of practice within the institution. This chapter examines the concept of the instructional designer as a broker, and the implementation of blended learning as an institute-wide initiative within a traditional university in Hong Kong.

Communities of Practice

A community of practice can be defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise

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