Chapter VII

Instructional Design, Development, and Context Expertise:
A Model for "Cross Cultural" Collaboration

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Abstract

The work of instructional designers in the current higher educational context is part of a complex process that traverses a range of professional relationships and communities of practice. The requisite professional skills include the ability to operate and communicate effectively across these different professional cultures. The term "culture" is used in a novel way to reflect the "academic tribes" concept described in the literature, and to highlight the complexity of working relationships in teams that are often transitory. This chapter presents a model that situates the instructional designers' role within the process of educational design and development. The model is derived from many years experience of managing development teams of different size and composition. Representative case studies provide evidence of its effectiveness across a range of projects and situations.

Introduction

This chapter presents an experientially derived process model that situates the work of university sector instructional designers within teams of discipline-based content experts and materials production personnel. The basis of this model in experience may assist practitioners in the field to fully understand the current demands of the role. The authors acknowledge that in many tertiary institutions, the process of curriculum or educational materials development is fragmented within the overall structure of the organization, and that this can impede progress towards implementation of teaching and learning enhancement strategies. In many cases, efficient systems, structures and channels of communication to facilitate this implementation process have yet to be fully established. It is particularly common in the case of e-learning, where many of the roles involved have been only recently established and the remainder are still evolving. Opinions vary on the ideal constitution of roles, location of services and means to formalize functional relationships between existing organizational units. One common approach is for a central unit to employ instructional design specialists to serve an entire institution, and subject matter experts to join transitory teams that are set up to work on specific development projects. While this centralized model is efficient in terms of resource use, the advantage may be offset by high demand for a range of management services. An emergent and increasingly common alternative is a networked model that creates opportunities for cross-functional synergies of the type that sustained working relationships allow to flourish. While a degree of replication may occur when this model is applied, the discipline-based instructional design specialist may offer a greater range of benefits. The current set-up in many tertiary institutions reflects a combination of these two models, with the optimum structure and network of relationships yet to be fully established. Our aim in this chapter is to provide an experience-based model to guide effective navigation of the terrain of the practicing instructional designer. While the model was developed in a university setting, the principles of good practice could equally be applied in commercial training development contexts. Instructional designers in commercial contexts may be working in institutions and professional cultures that are completely unfamiliar to them. They must therefore be able to apply principles and practices that allow them to operate effectively from day one.

Background: The "Cultural Landscape" of Instructional Design

Use of the term "culture" in the title and throughout this chapter requires a brief explanation, as it does not conform to the most common understanding of the word. Here, it refers to the professional culture that exists within organizations and established communities of practice rather than to world cultures. So the "cultural landscape" relates to the range of academic and/or professional contexts that instructional designers work in. Related to this definition, the term "context expertise" is used to refer to experience of working within the range and type of professional environments that instructional designers must operate within.

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