

Chapter 3

Investigating Sociocultural Issues in Instructional Design Practice and Research: The Singapore Symposium

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is a narrative account of the process involved to initiate a program of research to explore how instructional designers around the world use design to make a social difference locally and globally. The central research question was, “Are there social and political purposes for design that are culturally based?” A growing body of research is concerned with the design of culturally appropriate learning resources and environments, but the focus of this research is the instructional designer as the agent of the design. Colloquially put, if, as has been suggested, we tend to design for ourselves, we should understand the sociocultural influences on us and how they inform our practices. We should also develop respect for, and learn from, how various global cultures address similar design problems differently. The authors report the results of a preliminary investigation held with instructional designers from ten countries to examine culturally situated values and practices of instructional design, describe the research protocol developed to expand the investigation internationally, and share emerging issues for instructional design research with international colleagues. In this chapter, the authors link their earlier work on instructional designer agency with the growing research base on instructional design for multicultural and/or international learners. This research takes the shape of user-centred design and visual design; international curriculum development, particularly in online or distance learning; and emphasis on culturally appropriate interactions. We have suggested that instructional designers’ identity, including their values and beliefs about the purpose of design, are pivotal to the design problems

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they choose to work on, the contexts in which they choose to practice, and with whom. Our interest in the culture of design, then, is less process-based (how to do it) than interrogative (why we do it the way we do). And that has led us to ask, “Is there one culture of instructional design, or are there many, and how are these cultures embodied in instructional designers’ practice?” The idea of design culture is well established. Most notably, investigations of professional culture have attracted significant attention (Boling, 2006; Hill, J., et. al., 2005; Snelbecker, 1999). These investigations have concentrated on how different professions, such as architecture, drama, engineering and fine art approach design differently, with the goal of informing the practice of design in instructional design (ID). The decision-making processes of design professionals have also been illuminated by scholars like Donald Schon (1983) who described knowing-in-action and suggested the link between experience, (sociocultural) context, and intuition with design made visible through reflective practice.

THE WESTERN CULTURAL ROOTS OF INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

The roots of ID can be traced back to the seminal work of Robert Gagné (1965) on the conditions of learning and early attempts to apply general systems theory and systems analysis (Banathy, 1987). By 1980 over 60 published ID models, conceptualized around the “standard” stages of analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation (ADDIE) were available (Andrews & Goodsen, 1980/1991; Gustafson & Branch, 2002). Although definitions of ID vary, most subscribe to systematic approaches for optimizing the effectiveness, efficiency and aesthetics of instructional products and learning experiences, and it is this definition that provides a fulcrum for our interrogation.

The majority of ID models (e.g., Dick, Carey & Carey, 2005; Smith & Ragan, 2005) could be said to be process-based, stipulating the processes and procedures that instructional designers should follow in their practice, although some models, such as those of Gagné and Briggs (Gagné, Briggs & Wager, 1988) were more theory-based and developed on the basis first, of behavioural learning theory and, later, cognitive theories of learning that have dominated the field for over 25 years (Willis, 1998). Regardless, these models described an expressly linear, systematic, prescriptive approach to instructional design (Andrews & Goodsen,

1991; Braden, 1996; Wedman & Tessmer, 1993) and were strongly objectivist in nature (Jonassen, 1999). Although they have moved away from strict linearity and are less explicitly prescriptive, such models continue to thrive in various portrayals (e.g., Morrison, Ross & Kemp, 2004; Seels & Glasgow, 1998; Smith & Ragan, 2005) and have been taught to thousands of graduate students (Willis, 1998). Consequently, instructional design practice in North America has been informed for over 40 years by the research and theory building of American scholars who disseminate their work in Western venues such as *Educational Technology Research and Development*. One might suspect that North American practitioners, at least, have been enculturated into an American, systems-based view of instructional design (Kenny, Zhang, Schwier, & Campbell, 2005).

Instructional Design as a Pluriculture

Our narrative research with instructional designers in Western Canada suggested to us that a “culture of instructional design” is important to deconstruct (Campbell, Schwier, & Kenny, 2009; Schwier, Campbell, & Kenny, 2007). For one thing, until very recently, graduate programs of instructional design were located at few Canadian universities, for example at Concordia University (doctoral) and the University of Saskatchewan (magistral). In the United States, by contrast, graduate programs

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