

Career Pathway: Personal Reflection

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As a freelance e-learning instructional designer, I feel I have a well-defined and stable career path. I have reached a point in my career where I have enough clients to generate varied revenue streams sufficient to sustain my business. Moreover, freelancing is flexible and exposes me to different industries, and I like tackling the different design challenges that come with each project. In this sense, I feel that freelancing is the optimal way for me to continue developing as a practitioner because I have fewer constraints associated with working for an employer; being able to pick and choose my projects allows me to focus on developing the many ID competencies that I feel I have not yet fully developed.

As a practitioner, I find it crucial to be familiar with such ID competencies and job skills as those identified in the resources folder for instructional designers, especially because they can change so quickly due to the nature of the technology within my field, e-learning. Moreover, technology can affect many of the skill-based competencies, such as the ones identified in Wakefield, Warren, & Mills (2012). For example, problem solving, which I consider to be an ill-structured endeavor, relies on the instructional designer's ability to create solutions. The authors attributed the ability to do so to one's developed analytical skills. In e-learning, such solutions can also be wholly dependent on technologies, such as learning management systems and authoring software—for instance, Articulate and Captivate. For me then, the e-learning instructional designer has an additional tool—technology—to help guide instructional development and to resolve design problems.

In Ritzhaupt, Martin, & Daniels (2010), I found the abilities domain very useful because I tend to think of instructional design ability as a monolithic trait; however, as the authors' job announcement analysis showed, ability can be classified at a very granular level, and employers look for instructional designers who exhibit a wide range of abilities that are both pedagogical

and practical in nature. Additionally, knowing what abilities employers look for will allow me to market myself as a freelancer with a more finely honed set of key words and descriptors of what exactly I am capable of doing for my clients.

It was also interesting to see graphic design skills appear as the highest-ranked item in Ritzhaupt et al.'s (2010) job announcement analysis. Because I am a freelancer and work without a support team, I have to wear hats of all sizes and shapes, including that of a graphic designer. Because graphic design is something that does not come easy to me, I have had to work hard to develop this skill. In doing so, I have become keenly interested in just how important user-interface design is in e-learning, in particular with self-directed e-learning courses for which there is not always a "live" person to turn to for guidance. What I have found from my own experience as a learner and have seen from users taking courses I have designed is that any energy expended trying to find something or figure out how to complete a task takes away from learning and, in most cases, heightens frustration and lowers motivation and interest. Curiously though, researchers and practitioners rarely address the effect of user interface design in e-learning on learning and motivation. My guess regarding the reason for this is that user-interface and instructional design are not considered to be domains that come into contact with each another, though I would say that for e-learning, instructional and user-interface design practically overlap. That employers have identified graphic skills design so prominently confirms what I have been thinking: that graphic design is an indispensable skill for instructional designers to develop.

One aspect of the Purdue LDT program that I find valuable is that the courses foreground the practitioner, which is why I find videos by practitioners so useful. Accordingly, I selected the

following videos based on the high degree of practicality and relevance to what I do as a freelance e-learning designer.

I found the “Rules of Thumb by Instructional Designers” videos very enlightening because I find that the kinds of ID heuristics identified in these clips greatly improve my efficiency, which for me as an e-learning practitioner is crucial. Merrill in particular articulates as clearly as anyone in the field what instructional designers should be doing; his principles of instruction have greatly informed the way I try to approach my design work. Brent Wilson also offers deceptively simple advice: Listen and ask a lot of questions. Asking questions to drill down to the essential training goals and needs, which the client may not even be aware of, can make the learning event much more effective by making it relevant to all of the stakeholders’ needs. In addition, Barb Bichelmeyer states a very sobering reality: Not everything requires a training solution. I have lost out on more than one project because I was honest with the client about training not being a panacea for the particular issues affecting sales of the organization. This brings up the ethical responsibility that we have to our clients to be truthful, which I feel enhances our credibility as instructional designers.

From the “Videos of ID Professionals” resource folder, I was keenly interested in Jennifer Randall of Maestro E-Learning because her company provides services, albeit it in a different industry, similar to the ones I offer my clients, which focus on not only providing an e-learning solution but also finding the optimal way for a client to train his or her employees (which may not always involve an e-learning solution). I also noticed that her process is similar to mine in that I conduct a discovery phase in which I draw out clients’ needs rather than simply rely on clients’ telling me what they need as they hand over piles of training material.

Ed Queen's Purdue guest speaker video caught my attention for three reasons. The first is the variety of job positions he considered once he completed his Purdue LDT degree. To me, this shows the range of potential applications of this degree and, by extension, the relevance of the instructional designer in today's world, where so much is driven by technology. Second, his current position involves developing foreign language learning objects. I have a background in foreign languages, both in terms of teaching them and training foreign language teachers. As an e-learning specialist, I had not considered foreign language learning development. Third, the scenario-based intelligence analysis courses Queen worked on mirrored a scenario-based anti-money-laundering course that I developed, in which the user has analyze an ill-structured situation to arrive at a structured solution. In particular, I was impressed with how detailed his storyboards were, which was necessary because he used "live" talent. I also thought his overall process was well conceived, which was also imperative given that he was interfacing with so many other people to develop the courses.

I was familiar with Reiser from his text (Reiser & Dempsey, 2012), which is why I chose to watch his video, the "Ten Trends Affecting the Field of Instructional Design and Technology", was also enticing because, as a freelancer, I always try to stay up to speed on current trends in the field. One trend Reiser referenced is the idea of performance improvement. This trend ties into a future goal of mine, which is to expand my freelance offerings to provide performance solutions. One potential roadblock is that, because it has been so long since I have been in a true workplace environment, I sometimes feel I have a blind spot and may be unable to offer relevant performance solutions. Related to this trend is what Reiser referred to as performance support, which I have also become interested in. Specifically, I am interested in designing electronic performance-support systems (EPSS) to enhance training and performance

solutions that I can offer clients. His fifth trend, online learning, obviously appeals to me as an e-learning designer. Reiser's specific data about the business arena and the use of technology-led training trending upward indicate that my particular area of interest, e-learning, will likewise trend upward, which is obviously a positive for me as a freelancer designing online training solutions for businesses.

There are numerous resources out there for instructional designers in my area of interest. One professional organization that I have joined is the Association for Talent Development (ATD) (<https://www.td.org/>), which used to be ASTD. In addition to its monthly publication, which features a range of articles focusing on performance as well as specific types of instructional strategies to help enhance learning, it offers regular conferences; has an extensive catalog of publications; and has several communities of practice, each of which is led by an expert in the field.

To develop my e-learning design skills, I am an active participant in the Articulate e-learning challenges: <https://community.articulate.com/hubs/e-learning-challenges>. In addition to promoting problem solving, visual and interface design, and creativity, these challenges are a great way to produce portfolio artifacts. To stay up to date on current e-learning trends, I regularly visit <http://elearningindustry.com/>. This site also offers design tips, information, and product information useful to e-learning practitioners. To improve my own design skills, I have taken several user interface design courses through <https://www.interaction-design.org/>.

One aspect of the Purdue LDT program that I find most beneficial is the emphasis placed on practice. As I take more courses, I'm sure my interest in other domains will continue to develop, so I look at this personal reflection as a snapshot in time. I realize that personal and professional development is an ongoing process, so I expect to build on this reflection and,

hopefully, by the end of the program I have an even clearer vision of my future in the learning design and technology field.

References

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