Teaching, Learning, and Collaborating: Voices from Instructional Designers when Preparing Graduate Faculty for Online Instruction

Dr. Mattyna Stephens
Texas State University - San Marcos, mls351@txstate.edu

Teaching, Learning, and Collaborating: Voices from Instructional Designers when Preparing Graduate Faculty for Online Instruction

Mattyna L. Stephens, Texas State University-San Marcos

Abstract: This study explored the perceptions of instructional designers when preparing graduate faculty for online instruction. The four emergent themes were: Instructional Designers as Adult Educators, Instructional Designers as Adult Learners, Challenges, and Recommendations.

Introduction

Several authors agree that barriers including family obligations, geographic location, and work-related responsibilities can prevent adult learners from being physically present in a classroom (Cole, Shelley, & Swartz, 2014). As a result, online instruction in many higher education markets has become an alternative method for adults to optimize their learning (Bowen, 2013). Virtual classroom attendance has become popularized by adult students so much that nearly six million enrolled in at least one online course during the fall semester of 2014 at a post-secondary institution within the United States (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). In fact, because online learning has become rather customary, it has influenced adult educators to think more broadly about future plans for programming and delivery (Conceição, 2016). Since online instruction has gained much popularity, it is important for adult educators to anticipate a burgeoning number of adult learners to fill spaces in these emerging virtual classrooms. As well, adult educators must consider competencies for instruction and design that support adult development in digital learning environments.

When teaching in digital environments, the expectation is that the instructor is the subject matter expert and also possesses the disposition to perform the tasks at the level set forth by the governing body or university (International Board of Standards for Training Performance and Instruction, 2010). To add, the instructor is expected to be responsive to the multiple electronic learning operations. However, Lee and Hirumi (2004) acknowledge that there are some challenges instructors face when transitioning face to face courses to online instruction especially if they are new to the online environment. Such challenges for instructors include preparing mentally for instruction, identifying technology for instruction, learning the students' capabilities, balancing managing, and facilitating the classroom, and assessing student performance and providing feedback. Authors like Adam and Logan (2003) recognize the challenges instructors face when preparing for online instruction. As a result, Adam and Logan advise instructors to consider developing a team to help with construction, instruction, and the overall operations of the electronic environment. It is beneficial for the team to comprise of an instructional designer, a member of technology support, and a co-facilitator. In paying close attention to instructional design, it is "all about crafting learning objectives at a level appropriate for the knowledge and skills that are being developed, then designing learning activities and assembling resources that help learners achieve those objectives" (Commonwealth of Learning,

2014, p. 14). Essentially, an instructional designer helps faculty perform the aforementioned tasks in an online environment.

Purpose and Motivation

The Adult Education master's program at my university made the transition to online instruction. During this transition process, I collaborated with an instructional designer weekly to do the following: develop course and learning objectives; develop activities that support the objectives; match technologies to accomplish the learning tasks; and ultimately create a course in a digital environment. After a full semester of collaborating with an instructional designer, apart from minor details, the course was ready to be administered online. Usually, courses are prepared at least one semester in advance. As for collaborating with an instructional designer, I learned more strategies to add to my existing funds of knowledge for online instruction. As a result of my experience, I became interested in the experiences of instructional designers when collaborating with faculty members preparing to teach online.

Literature Review

As online instruction gained momentum, authors including, Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) and Anderson (2008) offered the concept of Community of Inquiry as a framework for studying online instruction. Some studies identify the benefits to higher education markets when offering courses in digital environments (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Anderson, 2008; Grojean & Sork, 2007). Other studies examine the benefits to adult learners when engaging in online instruction (Kuo, 2015; Stephens, Coryell, & Pena, 2017; Wingo, Peters, Invankova, & Gurley, 2016). As well, authors including Kransow (2013), Sher (2009), and Cole, Shelley, and Swartz (2014) examine student persistence and student satisfaction with online instruction. Other studies explore both motivational factors existing among faculty when teaching online (Gannon- Cook & Ley, 2004; Green, Alejandro, & Brown, 2009; Shea, 2007; Passmore, 2000; Theall, 1999). Correspondingly, some authors offer strategies for instruction (Brookfield, 2015; Boettcher & Conrad, 2010; Stein & Wanstreet, 2017). The research on instructional designers highlight subjects including salary (Kim, 2015), demand (Yuan, Powell, & CETIS, 2012), and certification (Wai & Seng, 2015). As evident, there are untold stories of the experiences of instructional designers when preparing faculty for online instruction. This research seeks to address this gap in the literature. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to bring to bear the perceptions of instructional designers and how they construct meaning of their experiences when preparing graduate faculty to develop and teach courses online. The research questions guiding the study included:

1. What roles do instructional designers assume when preparing graduate faculty for online instruction?
2. What challenges do instructional designers face when preparing graduate faculty for online instruction?
3. What strategies do instructional designers recommend when preparing graduate faculty for online instruction.

Theoretical Framework

Richey, Klein, and Tracey's (2011) constructivist learning theory was the framework utilized for guiding this study. Constructivist learning theory helps to describe how learners construct meaning based on their social and personal encounters and collaborative interactions. During these engagements, the learner takes an active role in the learning process. Transitioning a course to a digital environment calls for the collaborative efforts of both the faculty member and an instructional designer. Primarily, the two parties work in tandem to transition a course to

an online format while maintaining much of the course elements and authenticity. Here, the underlying assumption is that both the faculty member and instructional designer are actively engaged in the collaborative process each imparting their expert knowledge. The association of expert knowledge led me to inquire about the learning taking place during this collaborative process between faculty and the instructional designer. For these reasons, the constructivist learning theory was used to examine the experiences of instructional designers and how they construct meaning as they collaborate with graduate faculty transitioning courses to online instruction.

Research Design

For this research, a basic interpretive methodology was utilized (Merriam, 2009) to explore the experiences of instructional designers. To recruit participants, I used my professional network of adult educators and described the study to elicit interested participants. Participants were required to meet criteria including identifying as an instructional designer, and having experience working with graduate faculty in developing and teaching courses for online instruction. Through a snowball sampling technique, adult educators led me to instructional designers who in turn, led me to other participants to include in the study. Interested participants followed up via email. In the end, eight individuals agreed to participate in the study. I provided respondents with a description of the study along with a letter requesting email consent. Afterward, I collected demographic information and set a mutually agreed upon time and date for the interview. Zoom was the video conferencing platform utilized to conduct the audio-recorded semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Associates, 2002). A constant comparative method was employed for data analysis purposes (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). Thick descriptions and member checking were techniques used to ensure trustworthiness.

Findings

During the analysis, the emergent themes were categorized into four primary areas: Instructional Designers as Adult Educators, Instructional Designers as Adult Learners, Challenges to the Learning Process, and Recommendations for Other Instructional Designers. The themes are explored in subsequent paragraphs.

Instructional Designers as Adult Educators. Upon entering this collaborative process, the faculty member is considered the subject matter expert and seemingly the instructional designer assumes a supportive role. However, across all of the interviews, I found that instructional designers transitioned into the roles of both adult educator and adult learner during the collaborative process. For instructional designers, they settle into the role of teacher or instructor as they begin transitioning a course to online instruction. One respondent suggested, "So we ask faculty how proficient they are with their learning management system. Then, we teach them step by step how to implement their current practices in an online course." One instructional designer teaches strategies to help faculty minimize high stress incidences during the teaching process. For example, "I teach them strategies for work-life balance. Since there are no boundaries in online instruction, it can be a detriment to an instructor's quality of life. So, I teach them how to get in front of what they don't know before they experience it in the wild." Others recommend the professional development course to teach instructors how to prepare to deliver courses in a digital environment. When faculty enrolls in the professional development program, "we teach them how to think very critically about the content and to perfectly align the content so that students can go from point A to point B…show that they [students] have succeeded in learning the material." I discovered that throughout this learning process, the faculty was also learning from instructional designers skills embedded in the learning. A

participant stated, "Faculty also learn best practices including collaboration, observation, receiving feedback from others, and administering a student perception survey to revise courses as necessary." During the analysis, I also discovered that instructional designers also transitioned into the role of adult learner.

Instructional Designers as the Adult Learner. Across participants, the instructional designers admitted to learning content across various disciplines. One participant stated this is an opportunity for me to become familiar with material beyond my scope of expertise. For example, I learned that if a pregnant woman eats lots of cereal, it can affect the gender of the child. See it is the learning. You learn quite a bit from all subject matters." Some participants agreed that learning discipline-specific language and the norms of the department was also significant to the learning process. For instance, "We work with a lot of nursing instructors and instructors from other programs….learning curve in the beginning…as far as standard language…expectations of what it means to be a student in a particular department." Others admitted to taking a more personalized approach to learning by discovering the specific characteristics of the instructor. For instance, "I try to learn their philosophical approach to teaching….things that are important regardless of the environment….teaching strategies that they may use to help maintain their integrity and to avoid losing who they are as a teacher in the new environment [online]." Some refer to the learning as lifelong indicating, "Like most adults, we [instructional designers] are lifelong learners. So, it gives us [instructional designers] the opportunity to learn from faculty as well when developing these courses [online instruction]." Again, across participants, the instructional designers viewed these learning experiences as an opportunity to develop skills that may be applied in the future when tasked with working with other faculty members transitioning their course. While there were moments of teaching and learning, the instructional designers also identified challenges during the collaboration.

Challenges to the Learning Process. Challenges also characterized the collaborative process. For many participants working with faculty, unsurprisingly, I found that time or the lack thereof on the faculty's part disrupted the collaborative process. One participant stated,

> Creating a fully online course you put in a lot of time in the beginning. Faculty members do not have the time. There is a heavy emphasis on planning…strategizing…thinking through when things fail…backup plan….it is quite the process and faculty don't have the time.

These instructional designers also identified a misconception among faculty, that online delivery was easy as opposed to a challenge. For example, one participant said, "Some faculty members believe because they have…technology skills…know their content they can just throw the course together without considering the different pedagogical approach an online course may require." Because of the misperceptions of online instruction [thinking] that it is easier than face-to-face instruction sometimes faculty do not see the usefulness of collaborating with an instructional designer. A participant indicated, "We are not here to question their skills…content…but rather build a framework that would efficiently and effectively get their content across." Another participant imparted, "Some [faculty] are great at giving you the opportunity to work with them….others [faculty] don't see your value….I show them that yes, I have value and I am here to help you….through discovery learning, I teach them the magic of my ways, and they are good [fine]." Finally, challenges for instructional designers also include a faculty member's attitude towards the transition process. For many faculty members, online instruction may be a new experience, and they may experience some trepidation. Other faculty members may be called upon to teach online and are reluctant to engage in the process. Many participants stated that

faculty members' attitudes and feelings come as no surprise especially if they "did not ask to teach, but were being told to do so." One participant indicated, "When they are forced to teach online, they are not in the best mindset when they come to us [instructional designer]." Another stated, "Collaborating with faculty can sometimes be a challenge when they are not coming on their own volition." As well, another instructional designer expressed, "They are told 'you need to do this' [teach on line] and faculty is not up for the challenge. They are comfortable with teaching face-to-face." As with any collaboration there are likely to be some challenges. To help minimize some of the challenges recommendations were also included.

Recommendations for Instructional Designers. Participants for this study offered recommendations for other instructional designers when preparing graduate faculty to teach online. The participants expressed the importance of providing faculty with the necessary tools to help them have a successful online experience by offering them various templates (storyboard and matrix), design documents, examples, and continuous feedback. It was also recommended that instructional designers meet faculty where they are in this collaborative experience as faculty are restricted by time. Besides, the ultimate goal is for faculty to have a finished product that meets academic standards. They also recommend building relationships with faculty. Faculty members are a diverse group of learners of various nationalities, personalities, and competencies. It is essential to create an environment that fosters mutual respect and recognition for the knowledge and skills both parties bring to the collaborative process. Participants also encouraged their colleagues to promote workplace learning programming that foster collaborative engagements among faculty and instructional designers. Lastly, it important that instructional designers realize there are differences among faculty, universities, and systems and to embrace these difference by learning to navigate with creativity and mindfulness.

Discussion

When examining the findings, there was an exchange of learning taking place between the faculty members and instructional designers. The faculty members learned strategies to develop and teach courses online while the instructional designers gained knowledge of different subject matter and practical applications. These findings support Richey, Klein, and Tracey's (2011) theory suggesting that learners construct knowledge through personal experiences, social interactions, and collaborations. Through critical conversations and offering insight, instructional designers were able to offer support to faculty members during the transition process. Providing assistance or help to faculty members was a benefit to instructional designers. According to Li and Xie (2017), helping behaviors can help reduce stress and increase self-efficacy among performers. Faculty members collaborate with instructional designers to transition their courses online to meet the demands of their organization. According to Jacobs and Park (2011) by engaging in both formal and informal learning activities in the workplace employees are better prepared to respond to changes and new processes that may occur within the organization. In some instances, due to a faculty member's attitude towards teaching online, misperceptions of online instruction, or lack of time, the learning process can be disrupted. According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999), it is common for adult learners to have misconceptions about learning activities or develop negative feelings towards learning if they have some trepidations or did not choose to take part in the learning process. Moreover, a collaboration between faculty and the instructional designer preparing courses for online instruction, faculty and student engagement, and faculty response to feedback from the student perception survey indicates that there is a learning community consisting of the instructional designer, faculty, and the student. Alfred (2009) suggests there is much to be said about learning communities. When individuals engage

in learning communities, the benefits can extend beyond learning to include networking opportunities and sometimes access to systems for academic and career advancement (Alfred).

Implications for Research and Practice

Richley, Klein, and Tracey's (2011) constructivist theory helped to identify the exchange of learning that occurs between instructional designers and graduate faculty transitioning courses from face to face to online instruction. Adhering to this theory helped to define the learning that occurs throughout the engagement. While there is some research that highlights both student and faculty experiences in online instruction, there is much to be said about the experiences of instructional designers as they are integral to the online process. This study seeks to add fresh findings to the existing adult and higher education literature as online instruction continues to gain much momentum. These findings also suggest that there is an exchange of learning among faculty and instructional designers when preparing courses for online; therefore, it is essential for adult and higher education markets to increase opportunities for workplace learning to occur. The findings can also provide administrators with the needed information to support faculty and instructional designers within organizations as online instruction becomes a viable option for adults pursuing graduate degrees. Necessarily, if universities are committed to this collaborative engagement, it can lead to a more educated workplace.

Online learning continues to shape the landscape of teaching and instruction in higher education markets. Therefore, it is important that future research focus on online course design and development, and the exchange of learning that occurs when transitioning programs to online instruction.

References

Alejandro, J., Brown, A. H., & Green, T. (2009). The retention of experienced faculty in online distance education programs: Understanding factors that impact involvement. *International Review of Research and Distance Learning, 10*(3), 1-15.

Alfred, M. (2009). Social capital theory: Implications for women's networking and learning. In C. R. Nanton & M. V. Alfred (Eds.), *Social capital and women's support systems: Networking, learning, and surviving* (pp. 3-12). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2013). *Changing course: Ten years of tracking online education in the United States.* Babson Survey Research Group. Retrieved from https://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/changingcourse.pdf

Bowen, W. G. (2013, March 25) Walk deliberately, don't run, toward online education. *The Chronical of Higher Education.* Retrieved from http://chronical.com/article/Walk-(Deliberately-Don't-run/138109

Brookfield, B. (2015). *The skillful teacher: On technique trust, and responsiveness in the classroom* (3rd. ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Cole, M. T., Shelley, D. J., & Swartz, L. B. (2014). Online instruction, e-learning and student satisfaction: A three year study. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 15*(6), 112-131.

Commonwealth of Learning. (2015). What is instructional design? Retrieved from http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/664