A Grand Purpose for ID?
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If we ask medical doctors what their grand purpose is, they might describe themselves as healers; lawyers might say that they promote a just society and protect the rights of victims and accused; teachers might describe themselves as advocates for children and learning, and through them, the future of society. But how might we describe the simple grand purpose of instructional designers? What is our larger mission? What is our grand agenda?

As an artifact of a research program I've been working on with colleagues Katy Campbell and Richard Kenny, we tripped across this question. This segment will describe some of the issues that surfaced from instructional designers when we put the questions to them, and it will offer some perspectives on how the questions might be answered.

But why does this matter? What role does a sense of larger purpose play in nourishing a profession and its participants? On an individual basis, a grand purpose is something that sustains us—that gives us a reason to get out of bed in the morning when challenges are overwhelming, or we're just too tired to face another wave of problems. But collectively, shared purpose or vision shapes our professional identities by providing a metaphorical vessel to contain the disparate roles we play in our daily lives. Larger purpose provides perspective and the lynchpins of a professional community.

Some context

The program of research that informs this discussion is being conducted by Katy Campbell from the University of Alberta, Richard Kenny from Athabasca University, and Richard Schwier from the University of Saskatchewan. We have been exploring, through a combination of narrative inquiry and grounded theory analysis, the roles played by instructional designers as agents of social change. This led us through a web of interacting variables, including things such as professional identity, experience, institutional change, professional preparation, and professional communities of practice. The brief context that follows borrows directly from that program of research, so in places where I refer to "we" it is to acknowledge the research team that has worked collaboratively to generate these findings.

A considerable amount of writing in the field of instructional design and technology worries aloud about who we are and what we do as professionals (Gentry, 1994; Gustafson & Branch, 2002; Merrill, 1996; Reigeluth, 1996; Schwier, Campbell, & Kenny, 2004; Willis, 1998). Early and continuing efforts focus on developing models of instructional design that make sense out of the complex array of responsibilities that instructional designers perform, and ultimately can use to inform practice (Dick & Carey, 2005; Morrison, Ross, & Kemp, 2004; Seels & Glasgow, Shambaugh & Magliaro, 2005; Smith & Ragan, 2005). Some scholars argue persuasively that we need to reconsider the nature of instructional design, its maturity, and the assumptions that drive it by comparing our work with that of related professions (Gibbons, 2003; Waters & Gibbons, 2004). Recently, research has begun to examine (or re-examine) the nature of actual practice, with attempts to understand the nature of instructional design theory from the
perspective of actual practice (Cox, 2003; Cox & Osguthorpe, 2003; Kenny, Zhang, Schwier & Campbell, in press; Rowland, 1992; Visscher-Voerman & Gustafson, 2004). Visscher-Voerman and Gustafson (2004), for example, draw a particularly striking and useful categorization of how designers practice by proposing that they practice in instrumental, communicative, pragmatic and artistic ways, depending on a number of contextual and individual variables. Their study straddles questions of how and why designers approach problems the way they do. Each of the broad approaches to understanding professional practice—model development, inter-professional comparison, theory grounded in practice—makes important contributions to our thinking about instructional design. We reject outright the notion that there is a “right way” or magical set of questions that will provide clarity to our understanding to our field of study.

In our research, we took a different angle, and proposed a view that focuses more clearly on why instructional designers practice instead of how they practice. From this angle the instructional designer is viewed as an agent of social change at interpersonal, institutional, and societal levels. Designers act in purposeful, value-based ways with ethical knowledge, in social relationships and contexts that have consequences in and for action (Campbell, Schwier, & Kenny, 2004). We suspected that the social purposes of design loom large in how instructional designers express their own values and convictions through their designs. Ultimately, we suggested that the instructional design process may be a form of learning that leads to cultural change. In other words, instructional designers act as change agents who challenge and shape the institutional and societal discourse about the purposes and forms of learning.

What do we mean by change agency, and what implications does this view have for the practice of instructional design? We view change agency as a moral relationship with others. Fundamentally we believe that instructional design practice is not grounded in instrumental-rational processes as much as in webs of relationships in which social morality is central (Christians, 2000). Practice is embodied in the designer’s core values and beliefs, and expressed through decisions made during the process of design. Through the very act of discussing with clients the implications of new approaches to learning and negotiating a new approach with them, designers are modifying a social context, and the discussions contribute to personal and social change (Herda, 1999). In this sense design is not just a technical act, but also a process that includes moral and political consequences.

To be agents of social change, designers must be aware of values they hold, and be able to articulate the choices for action that embody them. In this view, instructional design is deliberate and critical. Britzman (1991) asserts that acting with moral agency implies that we have an understanding of our own personal history, circumstances, convictions, social context and even our confusion about what it means to be an instructional designer in an institution of authoritative discourse about the monologic sources of knowledge and power, and one’s role in it. In her discussion of moral agency, Britzman (1991) was talking about teacher education, but her observations are resonant with instructional design. She suggests that acting with moral authority requires a deep knowledge of yourself, including your own values, what you know, and how you see yourself acting in situations of conflict and contradiction.

Further, we suggest that the relationships inherent in instructional design practice offer opportunities for transforming the participants—particularly their beliefs about
learning and learners and their roles as educators. We propose that clients working with instructional designers in development projects are actually engaging, as learners, in a process of professional and personal transformation that has the potential to transform the institution, and by extension, society.

Initial results and implications

To date, we have interviewed approximately 25 instructional designers, primarily across Canada, but also including three participants from the USA and Australia. Two researchers independently coded transcripts of each conversation. Transcripts were analyzed using Atlas ti™ software, and as themes emerged, they were shared with the research team and the participants, and used to construct networks of meaning. This paper concentrates on comments related to how designers view their larger purpose and the grand mission of instructional design.

Instrumental descriptions of purpose

In most interviews with instructional designers, attention seems to be drawn to descriptive rather than interpretive discussions about the practice of ID.

When asked directly about the significance of instructional design, one group of designers spoke about their influence on immediate projects, or reflected on specific projects they influenced in important ways. There was little discussion of how instructional design might be influencing the future of education or training, at least, not specifically. When asked about social change agency, and their perceptions of what the role of the instructional designer is in that process, the perspective was primarily on functional aspects of the profession. There was mention of how we contribute to some positive social movements, such as eliminating stereotyping and institutional change, but most comments described functional rather than global concerns. Here is a sample of comments:

- To ensure that educational resources help people achieve their learning goals
- The larger purpose or grand mission of ID is to represent learners and to integrate learning theory into the development of learning materials and activities.
- I think the overall mission of ID is to help in the design of learning experiences/resources which facilitate learning easily and effectively.
- I would say the mission of ID is to optimize the effectiveness and enjoyment of the learning experience through thoughtful, well-designed instructional methods and materials. Of course, a less academic sounding one might be "to help people learn well without making them cry...or swear."

There was considerable similarity in many responses. These instructional designers had a clear sense of shared identity that was tied to function. Their statements revealed a strong commitment to the learner and an orientation toward empowerment. But that identity is tied to the development of resources and learning systems, not to any
lofty purpose served by instructional design. In other words, they seemed to want to discuss immediate aspects of practicing their craft, and were not openly reflective about the implications of that practice. They did not gravitate to questions about where the profession of instructional design is going, its evolution or social influence, even when invited.

This is not to suggest that these individuals were mired in an instrumental approach to instructional design. It is more likely that this is a natural expectation because graduate programs and success after graduate school emphasizes skillful professional practice. There is an urgency and immediacy in the practice of instructional design that may be reflected in the observations these designers made.

**Agency descriptions of purpose**

But by contrast, other designers hinted at the importance of the profession to creating social change, for leading educators in a mission to improve education, learning or society. These individuals commented on the social implications of their work, and some suggested that the process of instructional design had transformative value for clients and learners. Here is a sample of comments we coded to "agency."

*I see ... the same parallel in working on a project in instructional design as doing development work in emerging countries ... this comes from my studies in global and human rights education and critical theory ... this has been fundamental in shaping my own philosophy of design and education. Any time (an OECD country) went in and said, 'This is the way we think you should develop...This is the right way, this is our way'... there has been no success.... Social change requires that people change how they are in the world-their thinking-their feelings-their actions- and this is extremely personal. Dr. B. could have come out of that (project) hating technology... but the major change he experienced ... wasn’t really his attitude towards technology, but rather his view towards instructional design-- it was like, ‘Wow, instructional design is an area of expertise that is necessary and important!’*

*As developers and designers, we then went back and said, ‘Ok, how can these learners feel valued? What can they bring to the learning that they feel is of value and how as a designer do you build on that?’*

*So they were sort of transforming distance education materials and methodology to the local sites. It’s been sort of a practice that gets me in hot water now and then, but everybody needs hot water now and then.

*And I think that that’s really important and not only because faculty then begin ... this cross-fertilization, if you will, and a deeper understanding of what the issues are in teaching and learning within a multitude of disciplines.*
I think the effect of that might be that people who maybe have never thought about what their process is to teaching and learning, or how it might be thought or how it might be improved, made it more positive... But what are the values... that work together and [clients] get exposed to-- I think this has an opportunity for transformation.

How they perceive themselves, which in turn then is manifest in moving beyond... a technician’s perspective.

I think if it is possible maybe through the influence of instructional design we can create learning experiences and learning environments, if that is how we would put it... So that there would be some opportunity for students to be very experienced with what I would call a deep learning rather than a shallow, surface approach to learning.

... to teach a human being
... a human being goes out and changes everything else.
... and changes the organization in which they work in their own community, in their family life, etcetera.

So, in the final analysis, are instructional designers cogs in the education machine, or are they change agents? Our guess is that instructional designers may be acting as change agents more than they realize; that they are participants in moving educational agendas and sweeping societal change. But because the understanding of any grand purpose is not shared, instructional designers are not necessarily participating in setting the agenda for change. They often see themselves as significant participants rather than as leaders, and they are even somewhat bewildered about why people come to them only as an afterthought.

Is there a grand purpose hiding under that rock?

In order to develop a sense of the larger purpose and agency in instructional design, we must move beyond lamenting the failure of designers to faithfully implement the theoretical models of design at a micro-level, and inquire into “the epistemology of practice” that is complex, ill-structured, situational, and value-laden. We suspect that graduate programs in instructional design, particularly in North America, do not concentrate on these issues. We are stronger in teaching about how to do instructional design than we are about reflecting on why we do instructional design. So, it was probably not surprising that Visscher-Voerman & Gustafson (2004) found that most instructional designers they interviewed used a rational-instrumental approach. We found the same thing. Our graduate programs are apparently teaching quite well, but perhaps we aren't emphasizing processes that will help instructional designers articulate a grand purpose for their work.

If we are to promote the development of a grand purpose of instructional design, we will need to understand the motivations and values designers bring to their work. We
think that some useful clues exist in designers' stories of the transformative influence of
their practice, and in their descriptions of themselves as change agents at local,
institutional and societal levels. But we stop short of proposing what that grand purpose
might be. For one thing, it is possible there is more than one grand purpose, and it would
be arrogant and presumptuous to suggest what the single best one might be from the data
we've gathered so far. As Visscher-Voerman & Gustafson (2004) point out, a postmodern
view would hold that "Western scientific thought is flawed with its emphasis on
sameness" (p.83). But we do think it is a question worth pursuing, so instructional
designers will not have to flinch when someone asks, "So what does an instructional
designer actually do?" At least, it may keep the tone deaf among us away from singing
the "Little Boxes" leitmotif suggested by Michael Spector in another part of this chapter.
References


