

# Essay: IN SEARCH OF THE SECRET HANDSHAKES OF ID

Ellen Wagner, Sage Road Solutions, LLC

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Practitioners and scholars working in the professions clustered near the intersection of learning and technology have struggled to clearly and precisely define our practice for a long time - almost as long as technologies have been used to facilitate the creation, production, distribution, delivery and management of education and training experiences.

As a professional group, instructional designers – IDs -- often bemoan the fact that it is hard to tell “civilians” what it is that we actually *do* for a living. Ironically this inability to clearly describe our work is one of the “secret handshakes” that unites us in our quest to better define our professional identity.

One of my favorite examples of this definitional challenge was described in a recent blog post by Cammy Bean, vice-president of learning for Kineo, a multinational elearning production company:

You're at a playground and you start talking to the mom sitting on the bench next to you. Eventually, she asks you what you do for work. What do you say? Are you met with comprehension or blank stares? This was me yesterday:

**Playground Mom:** So, what do you do?

**Me:** I'm an instructional designer. I create eLearning.

**Playground Mom:** [blank stare]

**Me:** ...corporate training...

**Playground Mom:** [weak smile]

**Me:** I create training for companies that's delivered on the computer....

**Playground Mom:** weak nod...“Oh, I see.”

I see that she really doesn't see and I just don't have the energy to go further. I'm sort of distracted by the naked boy who just ran by (not mine). We move on.

Is it me? Is it the rest of the world?

<http://cammybean.kineo.com/2009/05/describing-what-you-do-instructional.html>

AECT has actively supported work on the definitions of big overarching constructs that offer people working at the intersections of learning and technology with a sense of identity, purpose and direction. Lowenthal and Wilson (2007) have noted that AECT has offered definitions in 1963, 1972, 1977, 1994, and 2008 to serve as a conceptual foundation for theory and practice guiding “The Field.” But they wryly observe that our definitional boundaries can be a bit fluid. For example, after years of describing what we do as “educational technology,” Seels and Richey (1994) made a case for using the term “instructional technology” as the foundational, definitional descriptor. Januszewski and Molenda (2008) returned us to the term “educational technology” as being broader and more inclusive. All seemed to agree that the terms educational technology and instructional technology are often used interchangeably. In discussing these implications for academic programs, Persichitte (2008) suggested that labels - at least the label of educational technology or instructional technology - do not seem to

matter very much. And yet, I wonder - without precision – do we not contribute to the confusion about what it is that people like us actually do??

And what about this thing we do called instructional design? That seems to be an even harder domain to adequately define and describe. A definition of instructional design offered by the University of Michigan (Berger and Kaw, 1996) named instructional design as one of two components (the other being instructional development) that together constitute the domain of instructional technology. Instructional design was then further described in the following four ways:

**Instructional Design-as-Process:** Instructional Design is the systematic development of instructional specifications using learning and instructional theory to ensure the quality of instruction. It is the entire process of analysis of learning needs and goals and the development of a delivery system to meet those needs. It includes development of instructional materials and activities; and tryout and evaluation of all instruction and learner activities.

**Instructional Design-as-Discipline:** Instructional Design is that branch of knowledge concerned with research and theory about instructional strategies and the process for developing and implementing those strategies.

**Instructional Design-as-Science:** Instructional design is the science of creating detailed specifications for the development, implementation, evaluation, and maintenance of situations that facilitate the learning of both large and small units of subject matter at all levels of complexity.

**Instructional Design as Reality:** Instructional design can start at any point in the design process. Often a glimmer of an idea is developed to give the core of an instruction situation. By the time the entire process is done the designer looks back and she or he checks to see that all parts of the "science" have been taken into account. Then the entire process is written up as if it occurred in a systematic fashion. <http://www.umich.edu/~ed626/define.html>

Ten years later, Reiser & Dempsey (2007) defined instructional design as a "systematic process that is employed to develop education and training programs in a consistent and reliable fashion" (pg. 11). They noted that instructional technology is creative and active, a system of interrelated elements that depend on one another to be most effective. They suggested that instructional design is dynamic and cybernetic, meaning that the elements can be changed and communicate or work together easily. They posited that characteristics of interdependent, synergistic, dynamic, and cybernetic are needed in order to have an effective instructional design process. In their view, instructional design is centered on the learned, is oriented on a central goal, includes meaningful performance, includes a measurable outcome, is self-correcting and empirical, and is a collaborative effort. They concluded that instructional design includes the steps of analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation of the instructional design.

During the years I worked as a tenured ID professor, I was a true believer. I was proud to serve on two AECT definitional committees. I strove to make the linkages between theory and practice, process and product clear and easy to understand for my students and in my work products. I ensured that my students were exposed to the theoretical underpinnings of learning, cognition and instruction. I made sure they understood that media selection was contingent upon the analysis of the learner, the learning, and the conditions of learning. I considered definitions as noted in the previous paragraphs as robust, defensible, researchable aspects of the discipline. And then I left the academy – I left my life as a tenured academic behind to pursue commercial ID adventures at the time when the phenomenon known as the "dot.com" was starting to explode.

As a commercial instructional designer and supervisor of teams of instructional designers creating digital learning content and courses, I more often found myself driven to meet a timeline, stay within a budget, respond to the needs of a range of stakeholders, making sure that the assets being produced were attractive, compelling, standards-conforming, and industry-relevant. Many of my sponsoring stakeholders – that is, the people with the power to buy instructional design services - wouldn't have known a learning solution if it bit them on the toe. Frankly, they really didn't care about learning. They *really* didn't want me to tell them about the gloriousness of ID. But

they were all exceedingly aware of the consequences for not getting a workforce sufficiently trained to support a new product launch or to respond to a new regulatory requirement. Shockingly, the beat that drove so many to push technology mediated learning in amazingly innovative directions in those days had far less to do with learning than it had to do with being able to bring “innovative technology solutions for learning” to market. In other words, it had a lot more to do with code strings than constructs, more to do with products rather than processes. These developments offered the object lesson that theoretical foundations guiding the study of the evolution of a field can be awkwardly out of alignment with the evolution of a professional practice, particularly one so directly affected by the speed of technological change.

As we fast-forward to the current day, the good news is that there has never been a time where demand for IDs has been so high. Sites such as Instructional Design Central list job after job, noting that “Instructional design jobs and eLearning jobs are abundant. They are available in various government, higher-education, K-12, non-profit, and business sectors. Instructional design jobs are in high demand as organizations are turning towards instructional design professionals to solve business performance problems and to provide rich learning opportunities.”

[http://www.instructionaldesigncentral.com/html/IDC\\_instructionaldesignjobs.htm#](http://www.instructionaldesigncentral.com/html/IDC_instructionaldesignjobs.htm#)

The not so good news is that the alignment between preparation and practice has continued to bifurcate. Many of the things that academic instructional design programs prepare people to do are not necessarily the same set of skills that employers look for when hiring an instructional designer. According to some observers and industry analysts engaged in enterprise learning and talent management, a majority of today’s working IDs do not come to the practice with formal instructional design education. Data tracked by the eLearning Guild, an international community of practice of elearning designers and developers who claim ID as the foundation of much of their work, indicates that the more a learning intervention depends on technology, the more likely it is that practitioners engaged in the work come from technological and design disciplines rather than from ID graduate programs of study. More than 2/3 of working IDs responding to the open question asking ID practitioners how they came to the practice that appears on Cammy Bean’s blog site report

that they do not come to the practice from graduate ID programs. Instead, they come from creative professions (e.g. artists, designers, producers). They became IDs when assigned with learning and development responsibilities. They are the IT professional who is put in charge of the enterprise LMS. They are the training manager who gets put in charge of the new elearning – mobile learning – game based learning – virtual world learning – initiatives that the enterprise wants to explore. Technical acumen – absolutely. Learning acumen – not so much.

Job descriptions for today’s IDs have a strong expectation for people with good communication skills and very strong technical skills. Today’s working IDs are technical writers, screen writers, video producers, project managers, budget manager, evaluators, graphic artists, graphic designers, experience designers, interface designers, web designer, content authors, scripters, coders, analysts. They develop Captivate and Camtasia movies. They know a .swf from an .flv, and can produce a virtual webinar on any number of web platforms. They administer blogs and wikis. They can program in Actionscript 3. Administer an LMS or two or three. Metatag content so that everyone in your organization can find it. Create videos. Develop apps. Evaluate the impact of a performance support initiative in your workplace. Manage a project. Soothe a client’s ruffled feathers. Develop a bottom’s up budget and staffing plan. Trouble-shoot the network. It can be a scary place for people who have only cursory exposure to the creative digital production skills required to adequately use the software tools du jour.

I expect that there are some faculty members among us who will look at these lists and examples somewhat dismissively. Yes, many of these are concrete operational tasks and production skills. There is no emphasis on learning theory. There is no emphasis on instructional theory. There are no assessments. These are not the things that graduates of academic ID programs typically expect to do. IDs with graduate degrees are prepared for different, higher level activities: selecting heuristics from among a range of learning and instructional theories to establish a foundation for designing an effective learning solution. Writing measurable, observable instructional objectives, developing valid and reliable assessments, conducting content analyses and learner analyses based on empirical evidence. Creating a shared collaborative experience and documenting its impact. Conducting formative and summative evaluations.

I say what I am about to say as a reflection, not a criticism: I do wonder how many of us could actually do the jobs that the people we purport to prepare in our programs get hired to do. I wonder if we continue to serve “The Field” by not actively exploring more and better ways to bridge the growing gap between our preparatory programs, our practice, and our practitioners.

As a case in point - how many of you actively participate in events like [SXSW](#)? South-by Southwest is a music, film, multimedia, video game, new media, design, trend-setting, opinion-leading festival that is THE place to be if you have aspiration of “being somebody” in the design, media, and entertainment industries. I'm sure you have probably seen the news stories, blog posts and many tweets from the technology, media film, and music industry cogniscenti who descend upon the City of Austin, Texas during this two week spring gathering. Amazing energy; Lots of young designers, producers, entrepreneurs. Lots of digital media experiences. For better or worse, very little focus on educational technology, instructional technology or instructional design.

Another case in point - how many instructional designer programs participate in events like [GDC](#), the Game Developer's Conference? This is the influential, “see and be seen” gathering of the game industry. From casual games to edutainment, Wii to 3D, MMOGs to geo-games, the GDC is a meeting ground for developers, producers, distributors and pundits. Lots of young designers, producers, entrepreneurs. Lots of digital media experiences. Very little focus on educational technology, instructional technology or instructional design.

These days, whether we like it or not, educational technologists and instructional designers need to understand that leveraging technology in our work is a requirement, not an option. And whether one is dealing with representative media, digital media, ILT or CBT, eLearning or mLearning, Web 1.0 or Web 2.0 social media, 3D and immersive media and beyond, IDs must be able to:

- Analyze the learner, the context, the situation.
- Design an intervention.
- Develop and produce it.
- Implement it.
- Evaluate it.

IDs are responsible for managing the conditions, inputs and outcomes of experiences that actively

promote and enable an improvement in learning and performance - whether we use a constructivist approach, a social learning approach, a connectionist approach or a behavioral approach. Yes, it's more than ADDIE. And yes, IDs DO need to understand the technology du jour, of that there is no doubt. But an ID is not necessarily someone who identifies him or herself by the technology tools that they use. We are so much more than the Apple iPad app or the Adobe Flash .swf. that we create.

Today, an ID produces value through the design, development and distribution of learning solutions. We used to look more like psychologists than artists, scripters or programmers, but that balance has shifted. ID must work with technology tools, because so much of today's learning and performance support is enabled / managed / distributed via technology. But IDs are not just elearning content authors, either. IDs are also engaged in supporting and enabling distance learning's web collaborations. IDs are starting to work more with mobile learning's apps and podcasts. IDs are learning first-hand that game design and instructional design have a lot in common.

For better or worse, we can't think ID competencies simply as points in a taxonomic framework. It's time to think about ID more in terms of what it is going to take to give our emerging professionals the strength, acumen and strategic awareness to take technology-mediated learning to the next level. I would hate to lose the learning part of what we do -I have had the up close and personal experience watching learning interactions reduced to a code string in Flash. As someone fighting the good fight inside the software company, trying to keep the focus on learning and NOT on the technology, I confess to being sorely disappointed when I realized that not very many people from “The Field” seemed to notice or care that learning lost that particular battle. Interaction? Forget teacher and learner, learner with learner, learner with content. In the land of software development, an interaction is a “drag-and-drop” feature.

Perhaps it is time to stop thinking about instructional design as a process and to think about what we do as product development. IDs produce engaging digital learning experiences that engage and inspire. Real value can be realized from ID process models when they are used to guide production - of solutions, of interventions, of digital learning products. A focus on production suggests that something real is being created. For better or worse, a "process model" sug-

gests "that which someone should be able to do," without insisting that one can actually do that which is being specified. We need to be more assertive, focused on the solutions and results engendered by our efforts. Maybe head in the clouds...but definitely feet on the ground.

As an ID stakeholder, I get a little cranky when industry pundits poke fun at us for being too theoretical. I am equally impatient with those who dismiss ID as being nothing more than an "engineering approach" that "sucks all the fun out of learning" (Van Eck, 2006). (<http://www.educause.edu/Resources/AnInstructionalDesignerLooksat/156841>). I try not to be too offended when I hear the cry of "ID is dead." Yet I acknowledge that there is fun to be poked. To be fair, if all an ID does is to rote memorize the **ADDIE** model and then expect to be successful then perhaps he or she DOES run the risk of becoming a "fun-sucker."

So I ask you this very pointed question - what do YOU think and ID should be able to do? Are we technologists? Psychologists? Evaluators? Programmers? DO we need business skills? Theoretical cognitive skills? IT skills? Are we artists or engineers or a little of everything in-between?

There are essential things that an aspiring ID - well, an aspiring new media professional of any kind - will be well-served to know. Even before analyzing audience requirements, or producing a solution to a learning or performance problem, or creatively expressing ideas and information in digital form, or measuring the impact of a lesson on knowledge or performance. If an ID model can effectively guide production, then all IDs must be able to produce.

First, one must be able to express oneself effectively in writing, using a variety of forms and styles to achieve different effects. Of course this means emails, blogs, IMs and tweets. But it also means knowing how to write a variety of types of documents, including things like a status report, a review of professional literature, a market analysis, a course syllabus, a creative brief, a grant proposal or two or three, project proposals, a statements of work, a bid for services, white papers, press releases, website copy, research proposals, case studies, a business case or two, a concept specification. If only I'd known.

Second, one must know how to present ideas to others in such a way as to inform, engage, persuade and to get a response to a call for action. This means expressing oneself verbally, both with and without a variety of presentation media, using a range of forms

and styles. This includes public speaking, conference presentations, teaching, training, briefings. But it's more about learning the psychology of persuasion, overcoming objections, inspiration, engagement and motivation.

Third, one must develop a moderate level of technological proficiency, and will need to be able to demonstrate those proficiencies using a variety of software. Microsoft PowerPoint, Excel. Adobe Photoshop. Premiere Elements. Apple Garage Band. Adobe Illustrator, Fireworks. Web tools. SWF tools. Adobe Acrobat or some kind of PDF/ portfolio platform. Web conferencing platforms. Social media tools. Twitter. Location-based mobile services. User-generated media production. Yes, you really do.

Fourth, one must have an appreciation for design. So many instructional designers jump into the work of doing instructional design without giving much thought to design itself. Designers engage in process of determining the form, function, appearance, or application characteristics of something. There are many categories of design, including graphic design, industrial design, fashion design, interior design, experience design, interface design, and information design. For some, design is closely linked to art and can be considered the expression of an artistic aesthetic in a practical environment. For others, design is a process of specification, composition and construction. A large element of contemporary industrial design is web design, which includes both the technical and aesthetic aspects of creating websites. Increasingly, rich internet application design emphasizes user experience, demanding even more sophisticated design sensibilities. For the good of our profession, those of us engaged in ID - regardless of our epistemological roots of professional training or the places where we work - need to find the common ground that unites and facilitates.

Theoretical foundations matter, but so do digital creativity and the ability to clearly articulate and represent meaning, probably just as much as do the skills to keep a project on budget and on time. We need to find our secret handshakes - the more that technology solutions for learning dominate, the more critical is that that we, the ID faithful, know how to recognize each other.

I expect that there are a few readers who have significant disagreements with some of the points I have raised in this essay. I hope so. JAID is aimed at helping the scholar practitioner raise the bar on these kinds of conversation. We can't wait to hear what you have to say. Bring it.

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