

On becoming a civic-minded instructional designer: An ethnographic study of an instructional design experience

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Abstract

This ethnographic study took place in a graduate course at a large research university in the Midwestern United States. It presents an in-depth examination of the experiences and challenges of a group of four students learning to be Instructional Design and Technology professionals who are concerned with the well-being of all members of a society, and wish to utilize their knowledge and skills to help solve social problems and improve people's lives. Building on the results of previous research, findings indicate that the course, designed using the Civic-Minded Instructional Designers (CMID) framework, succeeded in enhancing students' civic-minded agency, the group's purposeful and reflective acts that aim at addressing the educational needs of community members. The course was designed to mimic a small, multiteam Instructional Design and Technology consulting company offering professional-level services free of charge. Community partners consisted of four real-world clients to whom students addressed an instructional issue. Data were collected from observations, focus groups, individual interviews with students and community partners, and analyses of course artifacts and students' reflections. Students were found to diligently address community members' needs, give voice to their community partners, address sustainability of their projects, be sensitive to their community partners' perspectives and acknowledge their community partners as design partners. Challenges encountered include reconfiguring students' roles and building trustful relationships with their community partners. This study contributes a deeper understanding of the roles of instructional design professionals within larger social contexts. Lessons learned can inform the implementation of the CMID framework in other educational programs.

Introduction

Criticisms of professional preparation programs in higher education have centered on the lack of connection between what is taught in classrooms and the reality of the professional workplace (Schwier, Hill, Wager & Spector, 2006; Williams van Rooij, 2010). Graduates of these programs are viewed as lacking in practical knowledge and skills needed by their future employers and are having difficulties in transitioning from their graduate lives to working environments. In response, higher educational institutions and faculty are now focusing on developing students' technical knowledge and skills to better prepare them for the workplace.

Practitioner Notes

What is already known about this topic

- Current approaches to teaching Instructional Design and Technology (IDT) have focused mostly on preparing instructional designers for the job.
- There is growing interest in educating instructional designers to be both socially aware and technically competent in their jobs.
- The Civic-Minded Instructional Designers (CMID) framework is an alternative approach to educating civic-minded professionals.

What this paper adds

- Provides evidence on how the CMID framework is being translated into instructional experiences.
- Gives an in-depth case study of the creation of an IDT course guided by the CMID framework.
- Reveals the opportunities and challenges experienced during an implementation of the CMID framework.
- Illustrates the social interdependence between public service and higher education.
- Stresses the importance of social responsibilities in higher education.

Implications for practice and/or policy

- Uses an alternative approach to preparing civic-minded professionals based on the concepts of civic professionalism.
- Shares lessons learned in preparing civic-minded professionals that are of interest to those considering implementing such curricula in their academic programs.
- Offers technological solutions for the public good.
- Highlights the importance of being a social trustee of knowledge—one who utilizes his or her expertise for the well-being of society.
- Points to the urgency of educating professionals as agents of change with transformative power to produce changes in society by actively participating in dialogue, activities and social policies that affect public good.

While this approach has great merit in preparing students for Instructional Design and Technology (IDT) careers, it has been criticized for focusing heavily on the process of design, ie, the *what* and *how* instructional design should be practised (Schwier *et al.*, 2006). Additionally, this career-centric approach to IDT tends to keep producing technocratic IDT professionals more interested in economic gain than in utilizing their knowledge and skills for the public good (Sullivan, 2005). What is much needed is another dimension of professional preparation: a set of civic-minded professional qualities and identities that extends beyond the current focus on technical competencies in the education of instructional designers. The term *civic-minded agency* is defined here as an individual's or group's purposeful and reflective acts that aim at addressing the needs and concerns of members of a society. In this line of reasoning, a civic-minded instructional designer refers to an IDT professional concerned with the well-being of all members of a society, and who utilizes his or her knowledge and skills to help solve social problems and improve people's lives. Social change is at the heart of such instructional design work, and contributing to an equal distribution of social goods (e.g., education and access to technology) is the work motivation (Yusop & Correia, 2012). This study describes the unique experiences of four graduate students and four community organization representatives (referred to as *community partners* in this paper) in an advanced

graduate IDT course redesigned based on the Civic-Minded Instructional Designers (CMID) framework (Yusop & Correia, 2012). Two questions guided the data analysis and interpretation:

1. How do students in a course based on the principles of civic-minded professionalism enact their civic-minded agency while working as instructional design consultants?
2. What challenges did these students experience in enacting their civic-minded agency and how did they overcome these challenges?

The CMID framework

The CMID framework (Yusop & Correia, 2012) was created as a response to the call for designers to critically reflect on the social aspect of their professional identities (Campbell, Schwier & Kenny, 2009). From that point of view, instructional design is seen as a “socially-constructed practice rather than a technology to be employed” that has “socially transformative power” to bring positive changes to society (Campbell, Schwier & Kenny, 2008, p. 3). Instructional designers are viewed as potential agents of social change who “act in purposeful, value-based ways with ethical knowledge, and in social relationships and contexts that have consequences in and for action” (Schwier *et al.*, 2006, p. 76). Their views on the role of instructional designers as agents of change are shared and further extended in the CMID framework. This framework asserts that any instructional design work has broader implications in three interrelated contexts: micro, macro and mega. The micro context refers to a person’s immediate environments, such as his or her community, workplace or school; the macro context refers to a person’s extended environment, e.g., the district and country of residence, while the mega context refers to the global environment in which a person is immersed. Four qualities—beliefs, knowledge, skills and dispositions—characterize a civic-minded instructional designer as explained in Table 1.

The context of this study

The context of this study was a 3-credit postgraduate level instructional design course at a large research university in the Midwestern United States. Its aim was to teach the theories and practices of instructional design with an emphasis on IDT processes and consulting strategies, and it was designed to mimic a small, multiteam IDT consulting company offering professional-level services free of charge.

Instead of merely providing IDT services to *any* targeted group on *any* instructional-related issues, these students were required to offer consulting services and create instructional solutions for real-life social problems occurring in their immediate micro contexts. The instructor put a strong emphasis on providing services to socio-economically disadvantaged clients otherwise unable to acquire these services. Services were provided through community-based and nonprofit organizations based within 45 miles of the university and specifically serving community members of low socio-economic status, women and children, and elderly citizens.

The students in this course acted uniquely as consultants and project managers. They were fully responsible for initiating first contacts with community partners, identifying potential projects to work on within the course objectives and time line, creating the consulting contract, and designing, developing and delivering appropriate instructional solutions. This strategy expanded the more common approach of having the instructor play the role of project manager (Wilson & Schwier, 2009). Delegating these roles to students allowed them to develop closer relationships and deeper communication with the client organizations. Because contracting and negotiating are also critical skills in consulting, students should ideally have first-hand experience in developing these skills as part of the course. Students were not required to create a project budget, but the instructor shared her own budgeting experiences with consulting projects to expose students to the concept. Students were also required to engage in continuous reflection that took place during weekly class meetings in which students reported progress and reassessed work strategies

Table 1: *The beliefs, knowledge, skills and dispositions of a civic-minded instructional designer*

Beliefs	
Social interdependence	A belief that his or her existence and profession are socially interdependent with public service (Sullivan, 2005) and that his or her design work has implications in broader social contexts.
Social trustee of knowledge	A belief that he or she is a “social trustee of knowledge” (Hatcher, 2008, p. 25), meaning a person who is held accountable to utilize his or her technical expertise to allow for the well-being of all members of a society.
Agent of change	A belief about the transformative power he or she has to produce positive changes in society (Campbell <i>et al.</i> , 2009) by actively participating in dialogues, activities and social policies that affect public life.
Knowledge	
Knowledge about social issues in micro contexts	Knowledgeable and cares about social issues in his or her immediate environment.
Knowledge about issues of cultural diversity	Knowledgeable about and respectful towards diverse cultures.
Skills	
Interpersonal skills	The ability to interact with others, especially those from varied backgrounds.
Participatory civic skills	The ability to participate and take actions towards solving social problems.
Teamwork skills	The ability to work with others, including listening to and understanding others’ perspectives, to build consensus across diverse opinions, to engage in dialogues and to have strong relationships with others (Hatcher, 2008).
Dispositions	
Public spiritedness	Motivated and interested about the general welfare of society.
Motivated to help others improve their lives	Motivated and interested in helping others improve their lives. Make social goods (eg, education and access to technology) more equally distributed.
Support the public role of the profession	Understand that their professional work is the main platform to advance people’s lives.

and plans. This was the most important activity with respect to shaping their experiences and identities as civic-minded professionals.

Research participants

There were two categories of research participants in this study. The first was a group of four full-time graduate students: Marina, Julie, Rachel and Veronica; the other was a group of four representatives of each community organization the students worked with: Karen, Joanne, Michael and Katy. All names used are pseudonyms.

All four students were female, ranging in age from 22 to 38 years. Three of them, Marina, Julie and Rachel, worked as teaching and/or research assistants. All had prior teaching experience and had taken at least a graduate course in IDT. Veronica, a student-collaborator, was an advanced doctoral student in IDT and an experienced instructional designer. She worked closely with Julie on sandbagging training, a project she was working on with one of the community organizations.

The community organizations’ representatives were three females and one male with an age range of 25–55 years. Two of them, Karen and Joanne, worked at a nonprofit organization and had no prior knowledge of IDT processes. The other two, Michael and Katy, were experienced instructional designers working at a statewide public organization.

The instructional design projects

The students worked collaboratively with their community partners in three different design projects as presented in Table 2. These projects were not required to be fully fledged instructional

Table 2: Summary of the instructional design projects, community partners and participants involved

<i>Project/project outcomes</i>	<i>Project goals</i>	<i>Community partner(s)</i>	<i>Participants involved</i>	<i>Role in the project</i>
Create an educational poster advising low-income, uninsured pregnant women to seek maternal health insurance	To raise awareness of the importance of having maternity health insurance during and after pregnancy in order to avoid higher medical bills later	A community action organization	Marina Karen	Student-consultant Representative of the community partner
Evaluate a group of teachers' professional development training on using specific tools of a learning management system for online teaching and learning*	To improve the training program so that teachers could use the technological tools effectively in teaching a group of struggling high school students in an online learning environment	A statewide public television network	Rachel Michael and Katy	Student-consultant Representatives of the community partner
Design, develop and conduct practical on-site training on the proper sandbagging techniques	To prepare volunteers of a community coalition with aspects of preplanning and sandbagging techniques in the event of natural disasters and recovery efforts	A county-level coalition for disaster recovery volunteer organization	Julie Veronica Joanne	Student-consultant Student-collaborator Representative of the community partner

*Note: While this project was not a fully pledged IDT project, it was accepted and undertaken because of its benefits to the actual stakeholders.

IDT = Instructional Design and Technology.

design projects, but they did need to address a real instructional issue with social impact. More importantly they were required to benefit actual rather than hypothetical stakeholders, so they would partially or completely follow the different components of an instructional design process, depending on the community partners' instructional needs.

Methodology

Ethnography is used to understand how civic-minded agency is enacted in the context of this study and the challenges faced during this enactment. The ethnographer (first author) assisted the course instructor (second author) on redesign of the graduate course based on the CMID framework. The ethnographer completely immersed herself in the participants' lives by acting as a mentor, "external instructional consultant" and "friend of the class" who shared her insights and previous consulting experiences while simultaneously collecting and analyzing data.

The selection of the four students and four community partners was based on a theoretical sampling strategy allowing selection of research participants involved in the phenomenon to be investigated (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This meant that the group was selected on the basis of their relevance to address the research questions and make a contribution to the conceptual framework development of this study.

Data collection methods

Consistent with the ethnographic nature of a prolonged field engagement, the data collection activity extended over the 9-month period during and after the course was in session. Four main

Table 3: An excerpt from the exit interview conducted in this study

<i>Sample of interview questions</i>	
Demographic background	<p>For students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you describe your academic and professional background? (Follow-up questions would probe for past and current careers, and future career goals.) <p>For community partners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you describe your organization and your role in it? (Follow-up questions would probe for the organization's vision and instructional educational needs.)
Perceptions of learning and service components of the course	<p>For students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you describe your <i>learning</i> experiences in this course? (Follow-up questions would probe for motivation for enrolling in the course and perspectives of how the course contributes towards meeting prior expectations and/or learning objectives.) • How would you describe your <i>service</i> experiences in this course? (Follow-up questions would probe for the most rewarding part of the service experiences, the challenges encountered and working relationships with community partners.) <p>For community partners and student-collaborator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you describe your overall perspective with respect to the instructional/educational projects? (Follow-up questions would probe for the most rewarding part of this experience, the challenges encountered and the working relationship with students and/or community partners.)
Impact of the learning and service experiences on personal growth and professional development	<p>For all</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did your participation in this experience contribute towards your understanding of the role of the instructional designer/educator in society? • How did your involvement in the consulting projects contribute towards your professional development (eg, as an instructional designer and organization leader)? <p>For community partners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (In addition to the questions above, follow-up questions would probe for the impact of the consulting projects on the organization and on community members served by their organizations.)

data sources were used: participant observations, a focus group interview with the students, in-depth exit interviews with the students and their community partners, and analysis of course-related documents including students' written reflections, e-mail communications with class peers and community partners, and other relevant materials like brochures and project-specific websites. All observations were recorded in researchers' journals containing reflective notes of observed phenomena, analysis of interactions between and among research participants, and documented descriptions of emergent codes and themes from the observations. Additionally, interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed for analysis. Finally, document analyses were conducted to gain a holistic understanding of the course and the students' experiences as consultants in instructional design. Table 3 is an example of exit interview questions for all participants in the study.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using a methodology resembling a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During the initial/open coding phase, interview transcripts from each participant were first summarized to understand their stories and perspectives. These initial codes were then cross-compared with those of other participants to identify codes that could be grouped together. Following Charmaz's (2006) approach to axial coding, selected recurring initial codes were further sorted and analyzed. At this point, subcategories and their descriptions or properties were generated. Several links between the codes and the categories were later formed

and compared with other codes derived from other data sources. This process was iterated until each category was saturated, ie, each additional data element confirms each of the categories created and no further categories are necessary.

Strategies to establish the rigor of the study

In addition to prolonged immersion, data from different sources were collected for the purpose of triangulation. Member checking was used to support the study's credibility. The researchers also shared a draft of the analyses with all research participants and invited them to check for accuracy and add comments and/or additional thoughts. All participants agreed with the analyses presented and gave permission to publish the findings of this study. Both researchers constantly reviewed the categories and themes emerging from the data analysis, comparing them with their own observations and reflections.

Major findings

The major findings of this study were organized around two guiding questions: how did students enact their civic-minded agency, and what challenges were experienced in this process and how were these challenges overcome?

Civic—minded agency

Data analysis revealed that students *enacted their civic-minded agency* by:

Targeting and delivering services to address community members' needs

Students were extremely attentive to those whom their services would and should benefit. It was their belief that their roles as instructional designers was linked to public service and had potential to impact various social contexts. To the students, their real targeted audiences were not just their community organization partners but the community members served by the partners as well. Rachel, for example, was targeting her services for struggling learners who would take the online courses and not the teachers attending the training. Her concerns for the learners drove her critical evaluation of the teacher training. Her objective was to improve the learners' online learning experiences.

Students, too, viewed their partners as mediators or "liaisons" whose role was to "hook up the groups that need help with the groups that have the ability to help" (exit interview with Rachel). Both the students and the community partners mutually needed each other to fully assist the targeted groups. The students needed the expertise, facilities, labor and access to information from their community partners, and the community partners similarly needed the students' expertise to help them create and implement solutions that would work for the community members.

Giving voices to community partners and members

It was obvious that the students acted as if they were "social trustee[s] of knowledge" (Hatcher, 2008, p. 25), one of the civic-minded instructional designers' beliefs. They perceived themselves as professionals accountable in utilizing their technical expertise and knowledge for the benefit of the community and society. They were committed to giving voices to community members when developing instructional solutions. They were extremely cautious in sharing their own "professional" opinions as designers and did their best to encourage community partners to express their views and concerns.

Marina created several drafts of instructional posters based on her brainstorming session with Karen and shared them with a group of women whose backgrounds represented her targeted population. One of the immediate erroneous interpretations she received was that her posters implied some kind of abortion services advertisement. Surprised at such feedback, she immediately modified text and images to avoid misunderstandings. In Marina's exit interview, she explained:

“I believe that the outcome [i.e., the final version of the poster] is, hopefully, clear and that was my goal . . . It doesn’t matter how it looks to me. Of course I also have my preferences . . . I think they [i.e., the participants] should be heard.” (Exit interview with Marina)

Addressing the sustainability of the partnership: “leaving something behind”

One significant theme arising from the data analysis was the students’ public spiritedness, meaning their motivation to support the community members’ welfare. They sincerely believed that good consultants should “leave something behind” (exit interview with Julie), referring to the materials they created for the projects and their contact information for follow-up. They thus left their community partners with both hard and electronic copies of the instructional materials they created, hoping they could be reusable in the future.

Julie and Veronica provided their community partners with a complete training kit containing an animated presentation file, instructor’s manuals, instructional activities and an executive summary of the evaluation of the sandbagging training. These products were to support the community partners in conducting similar training in the future.

Being sensitive to partners’ perspectives yet diplomatically voicing professional opinions

Having been exposed to the concepts of mutual respect in class conduct, readings and discussions, the students showed the highest level of sensitivity to meeting their partners’ needs while simultaneously striving to find the best way to communicate their views as civic-minded instructional designers. The students were not only knowledgeable about their contexts’ social issues but also respectful towards diverse cultures. This required them to put aside their personal biases and ideas, build trusting relationships, and acknowledge each other’s abilities and expertise as well as any limitations they brought to the consulting relationship.

Reflecting on the success of the sandbagging training, Joanne indicated that Julie and Veronica’s diplomatic way of communicating their ideas using flash cards and animated presentation made the coalition members believe in and be open to their suggestions. As Joanne recognized, the students’ ability to balance professional principles with openness to community members’ ideas is one quality of a civic-minded instructional designer. This ability reflects respect for another’s expertise in balance with other factors so that the ultimate needs of the community members can be met.

Acknowledging community partners as “design partners”

The students also viewed their community partners as codesigners and tried whenever possible to include their community partners’ perspectives in every aspect of design and development processes. Such strong interpersonal and participatory civic skills are important attributes of civic-minded instructional designers. They viewed their community partners as experts in the subject matter and on the target audiences, much as the community partners viewed them as instructional design experts. The students used a variety of communication modes, including phone calls, e-mail updates and face-to-face communications, to gather their community partners’ input during the instructional design process.

Challenges experienced in enacting civic—minded agency and how they were met

Students participating in this study encountered *two major challenges* regarding enacting civic-minded agency:

Making adjustments and reconfigurations

Applying the CMID framework requires both students and community partners to adjust and reconfigure existing expectations, roles and actions, and such collaborative work requires a significant amount of time and full commitment from both sides. Overall, the community partners’ commitment to the projects was very high in the beginning but gradually decreased as more

time and energy were required. At some points, students were eager to incorporate their community partners' ideas into their designs but were frustrated by their partners' silences when asked for feedback via e-mails. Conversely, the community partners viewed the students as experts and thus blindly agreed to their proposals. To them, their silences meant that they agreed with the students' proposals, but these silences were sometimes translated as disinterest, disagreement and distrust.

This challenge was solved when students personally visited their community partners to follow up on their e-mail queries. Marina, for example, stopped by Karen's office a few times while Julie and Veronica joined a series of the coalition's meetings to establish good rapport with its members. These efforts were possible because the community partners' offices were short distances from the university campus and the students' residences.

Building trustful relationships

Without a trustful relationship, designers cannot obtain information from community partners, especially insider information such as the community partners' perceptions of the organization and its members. Building a trustful relationship was challenging for Rachel throughout her project. The difficulty began at the project initiation phase in which both Rachel and her community partners could not agree on the project's scope and the limited areas in which Rachel could work. In her reflection and interview, Rachel shared her feelings that her partners were thinking of her as a "free intern" rather than a consultant (exit interview with Rachel). Even though they finally managed to find a workable project for Rachel, she still felt that the clients' resistance to share some information with her affected her evaluation project. Likewise, the community members "... could not get the most valuable information they could utilize" because of trust issues (Rachel's written reflection).

Conclusions

Findings of this study support the view of instructional design practice as a helpful act for improving learning and "the very reason for the existence of our field—the reason why we apply science, design artifacts, and use technology" (Inouye, Merrill & Swan, 2005, p. 4). Students' commitment to ensuring the sustainability of their instructional design projects and strengthening their partnerships showed that they cared about members of their community and were inclined towards solving practical and community-related problems in their immediate contexts.

The findings also suggest that exposure to the concept of the civic-minded instructional designer via course readings, discussion, working on projects and continuous reflections on the experiences deepened students' understanding of their potential as agents of social change. In addition, the opportunity to engage in real-world settings allows students to connect course content to larger social implications of their work and to develop professional identities as instructional designers. This is consistent with Campbell *et al*'s (2009) study that explains the active role instructional designers play in activating change at interpersonal, professional, institutional and societal levels.

Instructional implications

Three critical success factors in educating civic-minded instructional designers were identified. They are:

Continuous reflections on experiences

Both the students and the instructor indicated that the students' ability to continuously reflect on projects and experiences as IDT consultants was critical in helping them appreciate the meaning of their roles as civic-minded agents. Reflections were verbal during weekly classes and in written form via students' design journals and end-of-semester reflections. Students found the sessions

extremely helpful by providing them a space for comforting, motivating, supporting and inspiring one another on their projects, refreshing their thinking and awakening their civic-minded agency. This finding corroborates other research suggesting that reflective activities serve as a critical part of an effective service-learning experience that in turn contributes to meaningful learning experiences (Claus & Ogden, 2001; Eyler, 2002).

Empowering students to be decision makers

Students in this course carried out the responsibilities of independent consultants and project managers with minimal formal intrusion by the course instructor. By assuming these responsibilities, students were empowered to choose the direction and content of their learning experiences. The role of decision making was strengthened by the fact that the students were immersed in a real-life situation with social impact. This approach differs significantly from other ways of educating instructional designers (e.g., Wilson & Schwier, 2009).

Educating community partners about civic-minded instructional design

Trustful relationships are a critical success factor when implementing the CMID framework. It was found that educating students alone on the concept of civic-minded instructional design is insufficient; the concept must be embraced and supported by community partners as well. The challenges students experienced suggested a critical need for the instructor to ensure that community partners were clearly aware of the nature and goals of the course, and to act more as design partners rather than as supervisors.

Limitations of the study

The goal of ethnography is to obtain the most comprehensive and holistic perspective of the group under investigation (Fetterman, 1998) and requires an extensive description of the phenomenon, participants and contexts. This compensates for the small sample count that does not support generalization to a larger population (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Nevertheless, the findings of this study demonstrate that an appropriately designed instructional approach emphasizing professionals' civic-minded identities results in their understanding how best to utilize their expertise for the well-being of society.

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