

# Exploring Dynamics between Instructional Designers and Higher Education Faculty: An Ethnographic Case Study

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**Abstract:** *This study concentrated on individual and team traits of an instructional design team in the presence of a robust relationship between the team members and faculty at a southeast state university in U.S.A. Three exploratory themes emerged from the interpersonal dynamics observed in this qualitative inquiry: (1) expertise, (2) work motivation, and (3) team culture. Preliminary results first suggested that professionalism with a mix of task mental models, assertiveness, and proactivity be implanted in the instructional designers. Then, instructional designers' growth and survival needs allow for active learning and continuous reflection on curriculum development and instruction delivery in the e-Learning business. Next, loose-tight leadership, collective cognition, and collegiality are rooted in the team culture as the instructional design team becomes established. Implications and recommendations were discussed in the research study.*

**Keywords:** instructional designer, team composition, ethnographic case study

## 1. Introduction and Background

Thanks to the online teaching and learning initiatives in institutions of higher education, instructional designers (or designers) have become a brand new profession for the past decade in the academic environment. Guernsey (1998) defined the new career tracks as “a hybrid expertise that blends academic computing with college teaching” (p. A35). Their primary job is to assist university faculty members in teaching online in a pedagogically sound manner. This proposition is endorsed by Truman-Davis, Futch, Thompson, and Yonekura (2000), who asserted, “The instructional designer conceptualizes the faculty member’s

vision for the course and guides him or her in incorporating appropriate instructional strategies and media as the course is developed” (p. 47). One role of the instructional designers is to provide faculty development opportunities to the university faculty with whom they work. The University where this study was conducted offers one faculty development class called IDL6543 *Interactive Distributed Learning for Technology-mediated Course Delivery*. This class focuses holistically on the pedagogical, technological, and logistical experience base necessary for successfully teaching online. The goal of faculty development is to render a transition among faculty from “field-dependence” to “field-independence” vis-

à-vis teaching Web-based courses. “Field-dependence” type of faculty member tends to seek the assigned instructional designer’s approval/support before making any decision or taking any action. Conversely, “field-independence” type of faculty has a tendency to decide or act in accordance with his or her wishes.

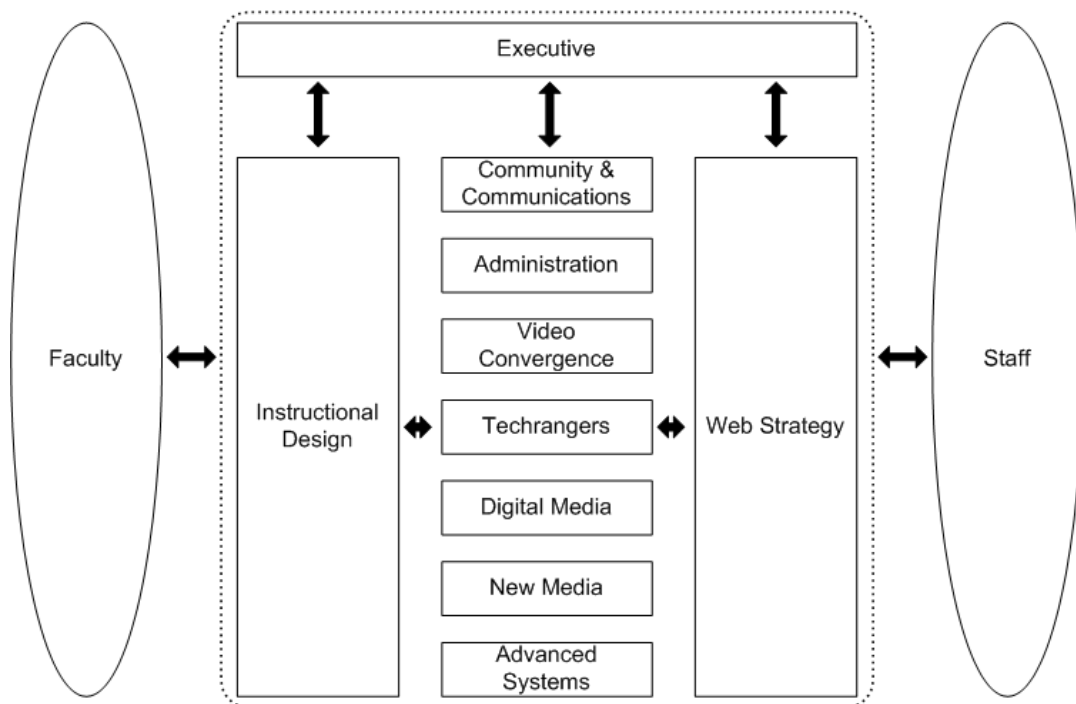
The University is a forty-one-year-old metropolitan research university located thirteen miles from downtown Orlando, Florida with a student enrollment of more than 50,000 across 11 regional campuses. Online courses have been offered at the University since the summer of 1996. As of fall 2009, the University offers almost 30 degrees and certificate programs fully online.

Founded in 1996, the instructional design team of the Web course/content development department (called the Department in the remaining paper) at the University collaborates with faculty in developing online courses for

the University’s distributed learning initiative. Internally, the instructional design team coordinates with eight other Departmental teams:

1. Community & Communications
2. Administration
3. Video Convergence
4. New Media
5. Digital Media
6. Techrangers
7. Advanced Systems
8. Web Strategy

Currently, the Department is composed of nine other teams in addition to the instructional design team. They are Administrative t Team, Advanced Systems, Digital Media, Instructional Development Specialist Team, Instructional Technology Group, Level 2 (formerly Video Convergence), New Media, Techrangers, and Web Strategy. Supervised by the Executive Team, all of the nine teams are assigned to various academic endeavors (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Relationship between the Department and Faculty at the University.

Like fighting in the front line, the instruction design team almost always has the first contact with faculty. Immediately after a consultation with their faculty clients, where needs assessment and task analysis are taking place, the instructional designers then translate tasks or “work orders” into other teams, either face-to-face or electronically, in accordance with the nature of each task.

Pan, Deets, Phillips, and Cornell (2003) reported a brief description of the profession below:

It was a summer day, close to 8 o'clock in the morning. He [an instructional designer] was working at his desk, as usual, with the computer on. He was taking notes down on the notepad, while he was reading emails from the screen. I realized that he was writing a to-do list to remind himself what is happening during the day. This was interrupted by an alert sound from the Instant Messenger. It was his client, asking for just-in-time information to WebCT use. He quickly responded to the real time message before returning to his previous activity. It lasted an hour to finish note-taking. He then went on to a conference room for a task force meeting, discussing a cross-team project with the Web analysts team and the techrangers team.

An hour later, he came back to the team office with a Web analyst talking to him. Suddenly the phone rang, and he asked for a pause to conversation to answer the call. Quickly writing down the message, he turned to finish the talk with the Web analyst. He then proceeded to a consultation with a new WebCT faculty user at 11 in the department of English.

Nearly 1 o'clock, he appeared in front of his computer again, with his hands busy moving between the keyboard and his peanut butter sandwich. While doing so, he was being in part of a conversation with his colleagues about teaching and learning models in WebCT. All of a sudden, there was a hard laugh in the conversation. I noticed that someone just cracked a joke about a birds' dropping on the shoulder the other day. The office was quiet after most of his colleagues were gone for lunch. He continued documenting the user file of the faculty he had a consultation with from the morning. At the moment, the phone rang again. He stopped to answer the call with a greeting. There was laughter during the phone talk. Then, he sorted the notes and tossed the old ones. He stood up and walked through the door to the digital media team for a course banner and bullets, customized as requested.

Twenty minutes later, he returned. A different alert sound was heard. He rushed out for another consultation in the college of education right after checking his Palm Pilot. (p. 290)

### ***1.1. Statement of the Problem***

Instructional designers working with each individual faculty member bring their own unique sets of knowledge to the transactions of abilities and skills between the two parties. To understand these transactions or human interaction performance, one aspect of the study was to identify any optimal personal and professional attributes within the targeted instructional design team at the University, which introduced another aspect of the study – What are the needs that drive the instructional designers to perform their jobs on a daily

basis? Furthermore, to what degree does the mechanism of this, then would the seven-year-old team impact its members' practices? One assumption was that individual attributes of the instructional designers and their team culture were vital determinants of their job performance. In other words, the successful functioning of the team is highly correlated with individual expertise, work motivation, and positive team culture.

### **1.2. Significance**

The designer-faculty relationship study promised a venue for in-depth research for practitioners and researchers. This study contributed to the literature by representing nuances of the dynamic relationship between the team and faculty and the mechanism of the team. In earlier studies of the instructional design team at the University (Pan, Deets, Phillips, & Cornell, 2003; Pan, Thompson, & Cornell, 2003; Pan, Thompson, & Deets, 2003), the robust relationship between instructional designers and online faculty members was uncovered and examined. The value of the instructional design team rested in the team performance represented by the product of instructional designers' professional attributes, individual needs for growth, and the team dynamics in the presence of their interaction and relationship with faculty. This study was intended to provide insights into the functioning of the instructional design team. These insights may be useful to those engaged in distributed learning activities at other institutions of higher education.

### **2. Theoretical Framework**

Murphy and Cleveland's (1995) four-component model, or a performance appraisal effort, was adopted for a theoretical framework in this human interaction performance study. This model stresses four critical components:

(1) the rating context, (2) the performance judgment, (3) the performance rating, and (4) the evaluation of the appraisal system.

The adopted model was intended to first draw out the essence of a well-established instructional design team, where different sources were collected to present a full picture of how the designers perform on their jobs, a method also advised by Creswell (1998). Their job performance on faculty development was used for judgment and assessment by faculty, their team leader, and the executive team member. Metaphorically, the instructional design team was placed in the center of a circle, which denotes a context of faculty development. With a customer feedback form, faculty participants' comments (representing their satisfaction), were collected in both numeric and text formats. Video interviews with instructional designers, including the team lead and one of the supervisors or super-ordinates, provided another useful source to better compare and contrast with the instructional designers' performance on the job. Field notes were taken. Intuitively, triangulation of the data diminishes the measurement and coverage errors in the process of rating or judgment and evaluation (Dollar & Merrigan, 2002). Knowing that each of the data collection techniques had its own strengths and weaknesses, these multiple sources may be able to compensate for the weaknesses of the evaluation system.

### **3. Method**

An ethnographic case study was conducted with the instructional design team at the University, as the unit of analysis. Researchers were composed of Mr. Parson, part-time employee of the Department, Mr. Taylor, an Executive Team member of the Department, and Dr. Campbell, a faculty member/qualitative researcher of the University. Mr. Parson had

been a colleague of the instructional designers' for approximately two years, and then he was then a part-time instructional designer of the Department. Mr. Taylor was Mr. Parson's supervisor at the Department. Both Taylor and Parson were graduate students of Dr. Campbell at one time. Please note that Parson, Taylor, and Campbell are pseudo surnames in this paper.

In spring 2002, field notes were taken about the kinds of tasks that the instructional designers performed in the office and how they performed them. This research began as a directed qualitative study for Mr. Parson. He then spent the spring term observing one instructional designer. Later, Mr. Taylor was invited to this research effort because of his knowledge about the interpersonal dynamics in the field and the nature of the instructional designers' job. He, as a supervisor, played the role of informant in the field. Based on both participant and non-participant observations, Mr. Parson recorded the process of the fieldwork of the instructional designers. Reflecting on the journal of the observations, Mr. Parson was prepared for in-depth interviews in better confirming or disconfirming the gathered information (evolving themes). Through the summer and fall of 2002, six instructional designers and Mr. Taylor were separately video-interviewed in a private room in the Department with each individual session lasting approximately thirty minutes. Several unstructured questions were asked based on the following draft:

- What is your relationship with your faculty clients?
- What is the most unforgettable experience you have ever had with your faculty and your team members?
- How do you define professionalism in your discipline as an instructional designer?
- What and how do you enjoy your job?

- How do you deal with conflicts within your team and those with faculty?
- What kind of changes has the team made since you came here?

Efforts were made to interpret and represent the picture in a subjectively objective manner. Commenting on subjectivity, Glesne (1999) stated, "Qualitative researchers, recognizing that subjectivity is always a part of research from deciding on the research topic to selecting frames of interpretation, began to claim the term. They discuss how subjectivity, in itself, can contribute to research" (p. 105).

The video was transcribed for content analysis. The recorded interviews helped the interviewer gain clarity in the research questions. The goal of such a technique is to assist the reader in knowing what the researchers saw by visualization and emotion (Eisner, 1998).

Quotes and examples were intensively used to support the interpretation throughout the present paper, which is a technique commonly seen in ethnographic case studies (Hayes, 1991). As Stake (1995) recommended, coding was used for data analysis based on the themes that emerged. Regarding the evolving themes, which is often seen in a case study (Zucker, 2001), the iterative process of analysis could be considered as a type of triangulation intended to enhance the worth of the project (Silverman, 2000; Yin, 1994). Kaulio and Karlsson (1998) also commented, "[B]y utilizing different data collection techniques [triangulation], a greater accuracy and a more confident interpretation of a phenomenon, than would be possible with one viewpoint only, is possible" (p. 104). Faculty participants' feedback in both numerical and text formats was reviewed to reinforce the team performance issue. The faculty feedback form was a primary rating system adopted by the Department to assess and evaluate the Department employee's task performance

in professional development activities. Four quantitative indicators, task value, jargon-free instruction, learning community, and compatibility to learning style, were measured on a five-point Likert scale. The four indicators were represented by four questions and they were stated as follows:

- Task value: The activities offered during this session closely match my real world work tasks.
- Jargon-Free Instruction: I was comfortable with the technical terminology used during this session.
- Learning Community: I felt a sense of community with other attendees of this session.
- Compatibility to Learning Style: I was encouraged to learn in a manner best suited to my learning style.

Another four variables were introduced in unstructured questions as follows:

- What did you like best about this session?
- What did you like least about this session?
- What is one way that you can apply what you have learned during this session?
- If you have any unanswered questions, comments, or suggestions, please write them here:

Data were entered either manually by the Administration Team or electronically by the faculty/staff participants. The form was administrated at the end of each training session the Department provided.

For pragmatic and instructional purposes, the faculty researcher (i.e., Dr. Campbell), confronted and questioned the student researcher (i.g., Mr. Parson), to refine and

distill the latter's understanding and thoughts about the case as well as to reconsider and review his judgment and evaluation skills.

Data were analyzed using content analysis procedures. After the transcripts and other data were intensively read and carefully coded, attempts were made to cross-examine possible underlying meanings of all the responses, field notes, and other sources as work logs. To reach an agreement, the three decided to tally the frequency of each potential indicator and then let eight of the most dominant indicators determine and define the structure of this paper.

The present ethnographic case study was designed in line with three methodological principles suggested by Genzuck (2003): naturalism, understanding, and discovery. The work relationship between Mr. Parson and the interviewees was amicable enough to cultivate a naturalistic setting for the investigation. This setting, in turn, seemed to diminish possible threats to the validity of collected data. Although understanding the culture of the targeted instructional design team through prior experience was a tempting thought, the use of an outsider, such as Dr. Campbell, appeared to contribute to the true understanding of the investigated culture. Besides, the list of unstructured interview questions as stated previously provided a workable starting point for the study. As seen later in the paper, these questions allowed the interviewer to explore and discover issues that were never thought about in the first place.

Despite all that mentioned above, the naturalistic setting may not be truly replicated. This limitation can be exacerbated when the time factor is taken into account (Myers, 1999). This may impose a threat to the study's validity and reliability.

#### **4. Findings**

What does an effective instructional designer look like? This was one question of interest in the present study. In other words, identifying the essence of an instructional design team within the context of faculty development was the primary topic of this study.

Listed below are findings, which are comprised of three emergent themes from the interview transcripts: expertise, work motivation, and team culture.

##### **4.1. Expertise**

Presumably, each of the instructional designers hired by the Department already possessed certain qualities valued by the team before they were hired. Four competencies that included faculty interface, curriculum development, instructional materials design and development, and curriculum delivery were prescribed in their job descriptions. The instructional designers' contact with faculty was evident and frequent on a daily basis. This, in part, is the reason why faculty satisfaction was used as a primary indicator of the instructional designers' job performance in the current study.

Positive personal attributes were helpful in dealing with faculty interface. Mr. Taylor, the Executive Team member, made this statement:

I think that is how all the instructional designers need to conduct themselves... to be perceived as... they should be very warm, very interpersonal, very personable, very highly communicative using whatever resources and personalities are there to have an engaging, warm, and robust relationship....Faculty would feel a lot

of support being there together with each other.

Although positive personal traits, like humor and amiability, appeared in interview conversations, issues pertaining to expertise, work motivation, and team culture of instructional designers were addressed at the advanced level.

With respect to expertise, the instructional designers had some task-related qualities in common. All of the six instructional designers, as well as the Executive Team member who had been an instructional designer for three years, had earned a master's degree in either instructional systems design or educational technology from an accredited university. Three of them were working on their Ed.D or Ph.D. degrees in instructional technology. They had significant teaching experiences at different levels at both K-12 and higher education with a variety of subject matters that included music, business, mathematics, history, and communications, among others. In addition to their prior experience of teaching and developing teaching plans, they had been working at the current position for two to seven years.

According to an internal document reviewed by Mr. Parson and Mr. Taylor, the excellence of faculty development offered by the instructional design team was apparent. Regarding IDL6543, the faculty development course required for those faculty who were preparing to teach in the University's online initiative, faculty satisfaction was determined based on the feedback (i.e., the faculty feedback form) collected, which generated a response rate of .82. Both the mode and median values were either close or equal to 5 (most favorable), using four indicators: task value, jargon-free instruction, learning community, and compatibility to learning style. In addition

to these numerical data, faculty satisfaction was also discernible in the responses to the form's open-ended questions.

One faculty participant wrote that what s/he liked best was, "Mentors [instructional designers] were extremely helpful." Another faculty participant wrote the following additional comment: "[It was] A great session. The input from my group was great and I really believe we came together as colleagues. Having the designers with us was great. Their expertise and insights was beyond being valuable."

These experts from the award-winning organization (i.e., the Department) possessed a certain repertoire of skills to enable their excellence on the job. Turning to the literature related to expertise, three subcomponents of expertise were further identified among the Department's instructional designers: task mental models, assertiveness, and proactivity.

**4.1.1. Task Mental Model.** Klimoski and Mohammed (1994) argued that mental models are cognitive structures that are assumed to facilitate interpretive processes by assisting individuals in drawing out information to avoid information overload and an unbearable degree of uncertainty. Applied to the instructional designers, a task-related mental model was found. Their previous experiences in teaching had enhanced their understanding of what learners at different levels are like, especially adult learners. Each of them had been working on the team for at least two years. This experience helped them acquire a comprehensive knowledge of how the whole teaching online initiative works (e.g, the task mental model). Brockett (1991a) noted that professional practice is deemed as a knowledge base, which lies deep inside veteran practitioners, who can achieve the instructional goals without much mental

efforts, like quickly recognizing a face from a crowd. The following conversations with two instructional designers can shed some light on this subject.

*Instructional Designer 1:* ...I try to work with them [faculty]. I try to encourage them to try new things they want to [try]. I'll work with them from wherever they are at, then guide them, and help them along.

*Mr. Parson:* So is it up to the faculty whether to take your advice or not?

*Instructional Designer 1:* Oh, yeah. Ultimately they have the final decision. I might see them in the [student] union, I would say hi, how are you doing? Usually they would start talking about their course. They might suggest or express some kind of frustration of something they want to try. I would say, you know, let's set up an appointment and see more details. We will go back to the pluses and minuses of the tool they are wanting to do. Sometimes they might have the idea how to do something, but they don't know how to do that online. I will help them come up with a way to do it online. If I don't know I will talk to other instructional designers to get some inputs.

The instructional designers' expertise in Web-related instruction was valued by the faculty. The faculty turned to the instructional designer for problem solutions. This is referred to here as a task-related mental model, which is embedded in the instructional designers via training and experiences. The instructional designers were expertly aware of the process of the Web instruction systems both in the Department and in the University.

In the following comments, the lead instructional designer pointed out that the



instructional designers should demonstrate the ability to deal with conflict issues on the job. When she was asked about her perception of conflicts within the team and between the team and faculty, she made the comments, "Conflict within our team is always resolved with communications. A lot of times we bring that up to our team meeting or retreat to talk about the issues [that] come up with the team... if there is a conflict with faculty. A lot of times the instructional designers at this point are well-trained and know where to go and how to resolve that." The lead designer was confident about the training her subordinates received. This was supported by the faculty's positive feedback addressed before.

**4.1.2. Assertiveness.** The Department was responsible for much of the University's online initiative. The instructional designers were the experts in the Web-based instruction. Generally, they were hired to cope with three issues for the community members (faculty in this case): learning, motivation, and technology. The instructional designers were considered a solution source for faculty obstacles and issues. Inundated by increased demands from the University community, the instructional designers learned to say, "No." The following interview fragment explains:

*Mr. Parson:* So they [faculty] don't really send their materials to you [for coding]?

*Instructional Designer 2:* No, the majority of them do it themselves....The faculty members sent me something, I don't just take it and put it online. I looked again, and if the Web design principles are violated, like underlying the text that is not a link, caps, or...

*Mr. Parson:* So you just cleaned them up...

*Instructional Designer 2:* NO. I sent it back to them and told them what else

needs to be fixed. I don't have the time to clean it up for them. If it is just one or two little small things, I would just fix it. If it is a lot, I send it back to them and tell them, "You shouldn't have underlined this, unless it is a link."

*Mr. Parson:* So you provided feedback.

*Instructional Designer 2:* Right.

The assertiveness represented above is similar to what Mohammed, Mathieu and Bartlett (2002) meant by conscientiousness, which denotes a motivational intention to "get things done," but not get along (p. 798). Instructional designers were committed to faculty development, but if they perceived that development principles prescribed were violated, they tended not to go with the flow.

To offset the downside of the increased workload, the instructional designers began to set up rules to manage the workload issue. In any case, Mr. Taylor expressed the following concern:

We ascertain procedures, policies, and methods to be put in place, so we can be more scalable with the number of work items and clients the instructional designers have to deal with, but hopefully we have not forsaken the importance of that relationship [with faculty], being able to identify with faculty members what he or she is going through and being sympathetic and somewhat empathetic, and so forth.

When it comes to quality of the online courses, the instructional designers remained assertive, but respectful.

*Mr. Parson:* What do you think of this class? A class without a sound

instructional design...

*Instructional Designer 3:* Right, and I am gonna tell you...I am gonna recommend to that instructor what he should be doing to really kind of hold the line to make it right, but he is not gonna listen to me...and that is fine. What he is doing makes him successful, makes his learners successful, and then he is doing something right. Maybe that is a little bit radical for a real instructional designer to talk like that. If it works for him, it works for students, then it works for me.

*Mr. Parson:* So in that case, you don't really bother to interfere with his instruction.

*Instructional Designer 3:* I am not gonna beat on him to make sure...

Faculty members have the ownership of the course on the Web due to the University's policy. To maintain a harmonious relationship with the faculty, all the instructional designers could do was to make suggestions as a catalyst expert. These kinds of disagreement decreased as students' feedback at the end of the semester was taken into the evaluation process.

**4.1.3. Proactivity.** Proactivity, according to London and Smither (1999), is believed to be a vital variable associated with the disposition to engage in continuous development. London and Smither stated that proactivity is a personal characteristic that drives an individual to take a proactive course of action for self-development purpose. This notion is endorsed by Borman and Motowidlo's contextual performance (as cited in Mohammed, Mathieu, & Bartlett, 2002), which "includes volunteering to carry out task activities that are not formally part of the job, helping and cooperating with others, and following rules and procedures even when personal inconvenience" (p. 797). Contextual performance is also known as Motowidlo,

Borman, and Schmit's organizational citizenship behavior (as cited in Johns, 2001). Though Mohammed, Mathieu, and Bartlett noted that contextual performance exerts an indirect influence on the organization's technical core, nevertheless the context forms a working environment that allows for that organization's task (or real) performance. The following conversation further illustrates the concept:

*Instructional Designer 3:* You can install Pegasus Disk on either or both. Depends on what you want. This is the old Pegasus Disk, and we are in the process of updating it. One of your assignments I think it is like a Week 3 or 4. You are gonna need some plug-ins that are on this disk, shockwave player, real player...What is the other one? [Looking at Mr. Parson] I cannot remember the other one.

*Mr. Parson:* Adobe Acrobat Reader  
*Instructional Designer 3:* Adobe Acrobat Reader. It is on here. Anyway, that is why I give it to you. You sound like you got the point. For some of the people that are brand new to this technology stuff this is a good way to start, 'cause they got tutorial on there they can use to kind of teach them the computer, the Web, browsing, browser and stuff like that. It sounds like you are way beyond them. Anyway if we are meeting in your office, we [I] would offer to install this in your computer for you. It is real simple.

*Faculty 1:* Hmm...that is nice.

Software installation was not a part of the instructional designer's job. The designer volunteered to offer assistance probably because he thought the faculty member would enjoy the features on the Disc, which in the long run would become a great interest to the

whole unit. Brockett (1991b) concurred, “The individual who views professional development as a basic responsibility is in a much stronger position to make decisions about the nature, substance, and process of these efforts” (p. 100).

#### **4.2. Work Motivation**

A second theme emerging from the interview transcripts is regarding motivation of the instructional designers. Choosing to focus on the motivation dimension of external vagaries of organizational life, especially as articulated in Herzberg’s (1966) work motivation theory (the motivator-hygiene theory), two concepts are crucial: (1) basic needs (e.g., salary, peer relationship, supervision, company policy) and (2) growth needs (e.g., achievement, recognition, advancement, responsibility, work itself). In Herzberg’s language, basic needs are hygiene factors, and the lack of those factors is correlated with job dissatisfaction, whereas the presence of growth needs, which are also named motivators, could attribute to the feelings of growth and development at work.

Although debate about the generalizability and oversimplification of Herzberg’s theory persists (Cooper & Locke, 2000; Farr, 1977; Graen, 1966; House & Wigdor, 1967), basic needs and growth needs are useful constructs for this study. For example, two growth needs, work itself and organizational processes, are also two vital sources of motivation (Farr & Middlebrooks, 1990). As Pinder (1998) suggested, “One need only believe that building jobs to provide responsibility, achievement, recognition for achievement, and advancement will make them satisfying and motivating” (p. 38). Further study for more empirical support is also recommended by Brief (1998). Regardless, how the instructional designers’ basic needs and growth needs interrelate with his active learning and reflective teaching and,

further, how they affect their performance at work are major factors in understanding the nuanced role(s) of instructional designers.

When asked by Mr. Parson about her belief in the teaching of the IDL6543 course, Instructional Designer 4 said, “I believe in active learning...I...just from personal experiences, I know that has enabled me to learn a lot better and a lot easier is taking an active role. I also believe learning is life long. You can’t stop learning.” Later in the conversation, Mr. Parson said, “What drives you to keep up this work?” The designer responded,

I love this work. You know, it is funny. I had been to other jobs that I had to work long hours with. I am a worker. I have to admit that. I enjoy working... but it is the purpose that makes it different. In my business experience...I didn’t like to work extra hours. I didn’t like what I was doing. I think I know education is always where I wanted to go. It itself is a motivation to me. But when I got out of here, I know I have skills...I have talents. I know I have creativity. This has been such an outlet for me and my creativity, because I can help a professor, who is a subject matter expert, take what they have and mold it and shape it...and I can use my creativity to help them develop a really well-done online course. And that is an excitement to me. That excitement leads my motivation.

In the previous interview, it is realized that the instructional designer’s needs for excitement turned out to be a large motivator through her career life. Work itself did make differences in her career paths. Her enthusiasm toward the life long learning was interrelated with her needs for growth, which in turn, kept her highly motivated on the job.

Here is another instance. Mr. Parson asked Instructional Designer 2, “What does your current job bring you in terms of your growth?” The designer replied,

I was a very traditional math teacher. Just memorized the formula. Not very hands-on. Not very constructivist, I guess I can say that. To apply those things now in the class I teach here, I think back I could have done that when I was teaching the 8<sup>th</sup> grade...I used to be very much “sage,” I guess. I was the one teaching. I was up in front of the class, explaining. And now I don’t mind being in the sideline, letting students work together. I can see the benefits of that now. Their interaction and them helping one another. You know, learning is taking place there. They are getting the knowledge they need. It doesn’t have to be me standing in the front of the class, just talking to them. In many ways, my philosophy of teaching and the method of delivery have changed. If I went back to K-12 now, I wouldn’t teach the same. Yah, it would be a different me.

The instructional designer in the conversation above reflected on his teaching methods from his experiences both in the past and in the present. Reflection was one of necessary components to better understand educational experiences and to develop better instructional skills (Pan, Deets, Phillips, & Cornell, 2003). Consequently, his reflection on the job performance was accounted for his work motivation.

#### **4.3 Team Culture**

The third emergent theme is the esprit-de-corps culture of the instructional design team. Smit and Schabracq (1998) claimed that team

culture’s impact on employee’s job performance is deemed evident. They continued, “Culture is in essence a pattern of shared basic assumptions and beliefs established by a team as it copes with various problems” (p. 14.). Three significant assumptions and beliefs, applied to the instructional design team, are further addressed below. Three subcomponents of this team culture were identified in the literature: loose-tight leadership, collective cognition, and collegiality.

**4.3.1 Loose-tight Leadership.** Sagie’s loose-tight theory of leadership (as cited in Sagie, Zaidman, Amichai-Hamburger, Te’eni, & Schwartz, 2002) posited that participative decision making and directive decision making often compensate for each other in the work environment. The value of the theory rested in the robust decision making style, which, in a sense, not only empowered the team members, but also required them to share the responsibility or consequences of the decision. An example of participative decision making is indicated below:

*Mr. Parson:* You just mentioned that your team had a retreat recently.

*Lead Instructional Designer:* Retreat I think is a kind of culture of our particular unit [the Department] because we value very much taking time out to think about what we are doing, to do things smarter not harder...to do things that can be duplicated again, again and again without a lot of efforts. So we take time to figure out what those things are. In the retreat, everyone has the opportunity to give their inputs. And we actually do that daily to have everybody’s inputs.

Retreats appeared to be an effective strategy to encourage different voices from the team members. It was a course of action

of the “loose” leadership style, because the leadership was willing to give an opportunity to the instructional design team and other teams to ascertain their voices were heard. Below is another example.

*Mr. Parson:* The workload kind of exceeds your capacity?

*Instructional Designer 4:* At times I feel like that. Only at times. I don't feel like that all the times. The more I learn...in the beginning when I first started here, it was very overwhelming. But our department has gone through a lot of change and for the better. Some of the things...you know, we see things happening, you have a voice, and you know...change happens.

The previous dialogue reinforced the argument that the team culture partially entailed the participative decision making style from the top down. However, this particular team was also directed by the Executive Team on other issues. According to the field notes, instructional designers like other Department's members needed to request authorization from the top management team to go on any funded business travel. This was considered as the tight side of the leadership. Clearly, loose-tight theory of leadership was adapted by management. Gibson (2001) emphasized:

Leaders, or members engaging in leadership behavior if the leader role is shared, may perform the function of structuring or organizing information, thus acting as catalysts that guide the group from accumulation of group knowledge to active consideration of that knowledge. (p. 129)

Apparently, the type of leadership affected processes and dynamics of the information throughout the team.

**4.3.2. Collective Cognition.** Gibson (2001) defined collective cognition as “the group processes involved in the acquisition, storage, transmission, manipulation, and use of information” (p. 123). The instructional design team, which was the largest team (eight full time instructional designers and four assistant instructional designers in addition to two part time administrative instructional designers) of all at the Department, was noted for the big and open working space. While they were working at their desks, they were like having a meeting. Conversations among the designers occurred every day, and they shared information and provoked thoughts of task-related and private subjects.

As the lead instructional designer acknowledged in the interview, her group's communications continuously took place, from retreats off the campus to team meetings in the office. Gibson (2001) also recognized the significance of group communications and asserted that when group communication happens, the information is processed by the group members as a sign of collective cognition. This is congruent with what Klimoski and Mohammed (1994) found:

Such shared cognitions enhance the harmonious interaction of individuals, especially under conditions of stress or pressure. Smooth team functioning can be had with a minimum of explicit communication when such models [shared cognitions] are presumed to exist...it has major effects on team work. (p. 430)

It is noteworthy that two terms, “team” and “group,” are used interchangeably in this paper. A sign of the team communications was shown in the interview with Instructional Designer 1 above. She mentioned that if she could not solve the problem for her faculty client, she

would turn to other instructional designers in the office for help. In the office, team members could overhear one another if they listened carefully. This was witnessed by Mr. Parson, while the field work was being conducted. The team lead's answer below supported this proposition when Mr. Parson asked, "How does your team communicate in the office?"

We work in a great big room where everybody is all there together. So if we hear somebody on the phone, having the problem, we can kind of go answer out to them. Or we hear they have a problem. After they get off the phone, we can talk about it. And I deliberately sat in the middle of the room, so I can hear everything going around then. So if anybody is having a problem, I can hear it and I can help.

Moreover, a typical day for instructional designers described previously also shed some light on the evidence of group communication or collective cognition going upon the team.

**4.3.3. Collegiality.** Group communications took place on the instructional design team because the team seemed to value the diversity of opinions, and its team members had an equal right to one another. They also shared the same responsibility. Besides, collegiality was built upon trust. When asked about his thought of career change from K-12 to higher education, Instructional Designer 2 made a comment on this:

I still apply so many things in education. In a great sense, I am teaching faculty how to teach...Coming from the education background, I have got chances to teach, and I am even teaching now at the college level. I got to apply all those things at the job. The atmosphere is more relaxed to teach.

Teaching wise, I think the thing I like most is...I don't want to say more respect...hmm...I don't have anyone watching over my shoulder all the time. My boss knows I am capable of doing the jobs, and they are comfortable with my abilities to interact with the faculty. They trust me. Whereas in the K-12 setting, I constantly had somebody looking over my shoulder, checking this, checking that. I don't regret a bit. It is a challenge every day.

Furthermore, Boyle and Boice (1998) proposed that the enculturation process comprises three essential components: collegiality, mentoring, and structure. The process was adopted by the instructional design team. New team members were treated equally. When they first joined the team, they would be assigned to veteran designers who then served as mentors. Through the mentorship, a team structure was introduced. To familiarize those mentees with mechanism and functions of the team and the organizational culture, the process usually took six to eight months or even longer, according to Mr. Taylor.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1. Summary**

With a faculty development solution as the background/context of this paper, three major themes emerged with identifiable seven sub-themes, extracted from the effective instructional design team (see Table 1 on the next page).

Expertise and motivation were examined at the individual level. Expertise entails task-related mental model, assertiveness, and proactivity. The instructional designers acquired a working knowledge in three domains: (1) technology—how the adopted

*Table 1. Emerged Sub-themes*

Theme	Sub-theme
Expertise	Task Mental Models, Assertiveness, and Proactivity
Work Motivation	Growth (motivation) and Survival (hygiene) Needs Integrated in Job
Team Culture	Loose-Tight Leadership, Collective Cognition, and Collegiality

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course management system (e.g., WebCT) processes and functions at the University, (2) learning—how the learning online works, and (3) motivation—how they can motivate the faculty. These designers were trained to be assertive in various situations to manage their workload and to capitalize individual efforts. They tended to take a proactive role in conducting their practices in the best hopes to avoid potential concerns. Proactivity contributed to contextual performance, which has a significant, although indirect, impact on their job performance in general. Also, instructional designers were found motivated by their growth needs: advancement, achievement, responsibility, and work itself. Reflective teaching was the means by which the designers managed to advance and grow. Lastly, the loose-tight leadership exerted a crucial influence on the team atmosphere and team culture. Chin, Pun, Ho, and Lau (2002) recognized the advantage of the employee's feedback to the organization as a whole by stating:

Use of feedback mechanisms and processes can help management understand how the behavior and direction of the corporate culture values can be controlled. Effective feedback also helps an organization create a higher level of employee participation and productivity as well as drive the workforce toward continuous improvement with a strong result orientation. (pp. 372-373)

The team members were empowered as equal partners (i.e., collegiality). The positive atmosphere resulted from the leadership style and collegiality, in turn, augmented the team information processing.

### **5.2. Implications**

In accordance with the findings, implications to the practitioners are provided below.

Acknowledging the significance of individual expertise at a team level (Cooke, Salas, Kiekel, & Bell, 2004), each member of the instructional design team needs to acquire a mixed repertoire of skills and knowledge of how the tasks are managed and processed on a regular basis in the context of a university's professional development.

As a reliable team player, an instructional designer acquires a (team) situation awareness (Endsley, 1995) of how each project or request is executed pertaining to other team members in hopes to cover for each other and to maintain team integrity.

Prior research (Rabin & Zelnor, 1992) shows that assertiveness at work can lead to higher job satisfaction. In such a fast paced business as instructional designers, one needs to insist on instructional design principles that he or she believes in. No matter what the situation or the relationship one may have landed himself or herself in, he/she must be

assertive upfront to avoid subsequent mishaps and consequences.

An effective instructional designer usually takes a proactive role (or thinks a couple steps ahead) in providing clients with assistance that is not even called for, in better hopes to prevent the snowball effect and other potential spin-over effects, as suggested by the systems approach. According to Gerhardt, Ashenbaum, and Newman (2009), this proactive personality may increase job performance, particularly early on in the job tenure.

To ensure work motivation, such instructional designer is likely to keep life long learning as an individual goal and seek a better self by reflecting on personal practices on a regular basis and further informing himself or herself of alternative ways to critical thinking and problem solving.

As a team lead or supervisor, a flexible leadership style is recommended to inspire employees' job performance. This concept is also endorsed by Harris and Hartman (2002). In other words, while there is a rule, there is an exception. Wise use of power or authority requires a lot of field experience and a harmonious relationship between the leader and the subordinates.

Of all the effective group communications, informal talks were found powerful in the study. This finding is supported by Fay (2006). A team culture ought to be apt to develop a friendly and modifiable atmosphere, which in turn, facilitates and encourages the informal conversation and knowledge sharing among teammates as well as information processing (including knowledge acquisition and feedback) within each individual member.

There are always trade-offs when making decisions on workstation design and layout

due to existing configurations of any given office space (Charles & Pero, 2006). To take advantage of informal communications, the seating arrangement within the instructional design team may be augmented and optimized to better initiate the informative conversations. For example, the team lead can sit nearly in the center of the office with other team members and student workers sitting around. Because such design layout may cause distraction to those who are not involved in the discussions, certain precautions do apply.

A successful group communication also relies on a close relationship among team members as suggested above for the team lead or supervisor. In this regard, collegiality appears to play an imperative role in leveraging the de facto superordinate-subordinate relationship as this investigation unfolded. By providing team members with resources needed and empowering them to take responsibilities (Masi, 2000), the team lead or manager is likely to build an esprit-de-corps team and ensure collective advancement.

### ***5.3. Recommendations for Further Research***

Further research studies are suggested. At a team or organization level, there is yet more research that addresses group motivation, step-by-step, for practitioners. Gibson (2001) advised, "Although we seem to know a great deal about individual level motivational processes, the more timely issue of how to initiate, direct, and maintain group behavior toward organizational objectives remains somewhat of mystery" (p. 131).

Apparently, more attention needs to be given to practical uses of group motivation. Other than that, the downside of collective cognition is that this kind of cognitive structure may "mute" opponent voices and hamper originality in problem solving and decision



making (Klimoski & Mohammed, 1994). Thus, studies on practical use of “devil advocates” in the instructional design team meeting and retreats under various conditions may be worth pursuing. Likewise, groupthink, defined by Janis (as cited in Harris & Sherblom, 2002) as “a strong concurrent-seeking tendency among members within a group that leads to a deterioration in the decision-making process” (p. 53), is a concern to team decision-making. This topic is also worthy of pursuit.

Though employee’s work empowerment has a positive effect on job performance, whether they are capable and whether they are willing to be empowered may be two legitimate concerns. Molleman, Van Delft, and Slomp (2001) stated that employee’s ability and attitude toward job empowerment may affect efficiency and quality of the team performance. As a result, those two variables may have to be addressed in the process of the empowerment for the advocates of loose-tight theory of leadership.

## **6. Conclusion**

With an advanced degree in educational communication and technology integration, these continuing educators seemed capable of facilitating professional development by designing, developing, and delivering appropriate instructional content to benefit the University’s workforce regardless of sex, race, age, and status. In dealing with a variety of faculty and other community members (i.e., staff and teaching assistants), their interpersonal skills were refined by ongoing training and experience. To stay effective, these adult learning specialists strived to cultivate a unique designer style and enhanced the repertoire of skills in the field.

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