Becoming an Instructional Designer

Laura March
Missouri Online
United States
laura@lauramarch.com

Javier Caride
Missouri Online
United States
jcr7g@umsystem.edu

Bryant Lazenby
Missouri Online
United States
bwlx3w@umsystem.edu

Asmaa Albadawi
Missouri Online
United States
aalbadawi@umsystem.edu

Abstract: Are you interested in becoming a full-time instructional designer (ID)? You are not alone. Recent occupational data confirms the field is expanding and has a faster-than-average job outlook over the next decade. While related literature defines the role, analyzes job posts, and identifies gaps between education and practice, no known work incorporates autoethnographic narratives of professionals who recently transitioned into the role since the COVID-19 pandemic galvanized the field. This paper and associated conference session covers the job's current requirements, the hiring process, and three "success stories" from practitioners who recently became full-time IDs in higher education. Session participants are encouraged to engage in speed-networking activities, bring their application materials for review, and ask questions about the role.

The ID Professional

Instructional designers – including learning (experience) designers, curriculum developers, and educational technologists – use strategies and technology to create pedagogical solutions and resources (Stefaniak & Reese, 2022; Reyna, 2022; The University of Chicago, 2019; Roubides, 2016). While the field has existed for decades across industries, demand for IDs has risen (and will continue to climb) faster than average (BLS, 2022a; 2022b). IDs bring a unique value to higher education, specifically, by bridging the gaps between faculty instruction and student learning – particularly through improvements in online pedagogy and educational technology (Intentional Futures, 2016). The almost instantaneous switch to emergency remote learning in spring 2020 provided a "previously unimaginable" boost to the ID field in higher education, with schools posting new advertisements for related roles while instituting hiring freezes and layoffs elsewhere (Decherney & Levander, 2020).

Recent reviews of ID job posts reveal employers seek candidates with pedagogical, technology, multimedia, communication, and collaboration/project management skills (Reyna, 2022; North et al., 2021; Surrency et al., 2019). Yet scholarly literature suggests gaps between both employers' and degree programs' expectations and the realities of the role, with many authors highlighting the "soft skills" necessary to work with reticent experts and faculty (Reyna, 2022; Stefaniak & Reese, 2022; Stefaniak et al., 2020). Social and emotional skills remain crucial today, as educators have the "highest burnout level of all industries" (Gallup, 2022).

IDs are both highly and diversely qualified (Pollard & Kumar, 2022). While the job generally requires a graduate degree (North et al., 2021; Surrency et al., 2019), credentials are not limited to a specific area of expertise –

perhaps due to the frequency of "accidental instructional designers" who transitioned into the role from other fields (Bean, 2014). It is a particularly enticing option for K-12 teachers, of which an unprecedented number are now contemplating career shifts due to stressors compounded by the pandemic (NAE, 2022).

Navigating the Post-Pandemic/Great Resignation ID Job Search

From a potential candidate's perspective, ensuring a new ID role includes desired qualities (e.g., meaningful work, salary, work/life balance, DEI commitment) is essential for navigating a job search in the wake of pandemic-related employment instability (Cech & Hiltner, 2022). Moreover, an increase of open ID positions may not correspond to an easier time receiving an offer of full-time employment. The exponential rise of automated resume screening and application tracking systems has led to the rejection of qualified candidates who don't supply the exact – and often inflated – descriptive criteria in their application materials (Fuller et al., 2021; Zielinski, 2022). However, new tools like ResyMatch and Jobscan (which compare resumes to job posts and identify potential improvements) can help prospective candidates. Similarly, email-based job alerts can be triggered by Boolean search strings (e.g., "instructional designer" OR "learning designer" AND "remote") on aggregator platforms such as Google Jobs.

It is helpful to arrange the content of application materials (including resumes, cover letters, and online portfolios of work) to follow a Situation, Task, Action, Result (STAR) format. The STAR framework (see Figure 1) communicates skills and experiences in a way that is helpful for hiring managers by providing context, specifying roles, explaining value, and describing tangible outcomes and accomplishments (Lebson, 2022, p. 80). For example, instead of "Served as website editor," a STAR-based statement might read, "Updated and redesigned 25 public-facing University webpages to comply with ADA guidelines and Section 508 accessibility requirements, preventing $100,000 in fines." Providing this additional level of detail is also helpful for ensuring application materials include the necessary descriptive information required by automated resume screening systems.

Figure 1
STAR Method adapted from the Foster School of Business (2015)

- ★ **Situation:** Define context.
- ★ **Task:** Identify key objectives.
- ★ **Action:** Describe the action performed and emphasize the skills used to complete the task.
- ★ **Results:** Summarize the outcome in relevant terms.

Candidates can repurpose and reformat their STAR narratives to prepare for interviews using a T-Account exercise (see Table 1). A T-Account matches accomplishments to employer needs (Levinson & Perry, 2011, p. 258). To create a T-Account, make a two-column table or draw a line down the middle of a page and write out the listed requirements from the original job post on the left side. Next, fill out the skills, accomplishments, and results that align with each qualification to demonstrate compatibility with the role and practice responses to related questions. This preparation method also helps ensure familiarity and comfort with the terminology used in the field by highlighting experiences using relevant vocabulary. Other successful tactics from three IDs who recently transitioned into full-time positions are described next.

Table 1
Example of a T-Account Exercise

Job Post Requirement	STAR Narrative/Example
Comply with ADA requirements	Updated and redesigned 25 public-facing University webpages to comply with ADA guidelines and Section 508 accessibility requirements, preventing $100,000 in fines.
Design and maintain interactive content that will work across multiple platforms	Designed and produced interactive media content and assessments for the first introductory visual arts MOOC on an Apple platform, garnering over 49,500 subscribers in 3 months.

Success Stories: Becoming an ID

Javier: Same Love of Wisdom, Different Career

Javier was largely unfamiliar with ID work before accepting a doctoral fellowship with his university's teaching and learning center. This new role let him put engaging, meaningful learning experiences back into the center of his work – a welcome change given the constraints he felt as a philosophy PhD candidate. Nearing graduation, his colleagues offered support with his job search, including editing his academic CV into an ID-focused resume and providing professional recommendations. Javier checked online job boards regularly, filtering positions primarily by location. Seven months later, he accepted his current ID position in March 2021. He encourages other interested graduate students to connect with their school's teaching and learning center and consider alternatives to "traditional" academic career paths.

While Javier was excited for the opportunity to focus on teaching and learning that professional ID work afforded him, he was also concerned about what he might be leaving behind. In particular, he worried full-time ID work might require trading a curious and thriving community of scholars for a more business-oriented or otherwise restrictive office environment. This apprehension, fortunately, was completely unfounded. If anything, the transition to ID work gave Javier the opportunity to connect with an even broader community of academics, experts, and students. From ID colleagues with diverse professional backgrounds to instructors and faculty from a huge variety of disciplines, Javier experiences regular opportunities to work alongside inspirational and knowledgeable colleagues. Moreover, the work itself is varied, challenging, and collaborative. His role combines abstract problem-solving (e.g., helping faculty better identify and communicate conceptual connections within their materials) with more concrete logistics (e.g., helping faculty identify and navigate institutional support and resources).

In the future, Javier hopes ID work continues to become more integrated with the broader higher education community. It has become clear to him that some (if not most) instructors have little-to-no understanding of what IDs do. However, the past two years have shined a bright light on the importance of ID work. As such, while he is uncertain whether changes will continue at the same pace, Javier is cautiously optimistic that this increased awareness of ID work will help all instructors in higher education (including teaching assistants) see the value of ID support and facilitate a more collaborative understanding of teaching and learning more broadly.

Laz: Pandemic-Triggered Transition

Laz is a lifelong learner and technology lover who began his professional career as a high school digital media teacher. What started with getting a master's degree in "something easy" for better pay later developed into a passion – ignited by the COVID-19 pandemic – for *helping* other educators incorporate technologies into their own teaching practice. Thus began the adventure of taking a deep dive into Google Jobs and Indeed armed with nothing but his resolve, his resume, and a one-page portfolio. Six months (and 12 applications) later, without much to show for it, Laz applied for – and got – his current ID job in July 2021. He recommends other K-12 teachers looking to make the same move not to undervalue their "hidden" ID work; it may not use the same keywords, but many experiences are equivalent.

A little over a year after beginning his first full-time ID role, Laz has worked on many projects supported by his institution. He is often asked if he misses teaching to which he replies, "I still am. I just traded my classroom of high schoolers for college faculty." Daily lesson planning and curriculum mapping became "guided course development" projects – working alongside faculty to write learning outcomes and design both challenging and practical assessments. Scaffolding and coaching became "quality course reviews" – working with faculty to ensure their courses meet institutional and Higher Learning Commission quality standards. Lastly, direct instruction transitioned into something brand new to Laz: blogging, where he shares his passions for technology and teaching on a systemwide scale. Now that effects from the COVID-19 pandemic are no longer taking center stage (where ID work has mostly been a reactive approach of accurately, accessibly, and effectively creating content for digital learning), he is excited to see how the teaching and learning process continues to evolve. Laz anticipates an increased focus on gamification – applying game-like concepts (including goal-focused activities, rewards, and progress tracking) to enhance learner motivation (Glover, 2013) – as well as using virtual and/or augmented reality to give students a digital experience of concepts and ideas.

Asmaa: Trusting the Journey

Asmaa's career path took many twists and turns – some planned, others unexpected. After graduating with a BA in human biology and starting her professional life working at a medical research lab, she transitioned to elementary and middle school instruction (while also completing a master's degree in teaching) and later to instructional coaching. Asmaa then realized she wanted to make a difference on a broader scale. Equipped with her resume (recently edited to highlight the transferable skills between K-12 teaching, coaching, and ID work), tools such as LinkedIn and Indeed, and her strong faith, Asmaa spent months applying for positions until her career path curved once again for her current role, which she began in July 2022. If she were starting her ID job search over again today, Asmaa would remind herself to persevere and view the roadblocks she encounters as gentle nudges guiding her toward a better future opportunity.

Now a few months in, Asmaa found that the Venn diagram of teaching and instructional design features a much larger intersection than she initially expected. The two fields distill into the same elements: designing effective learning experiences, utilizing appropriate technological tools, having a strong grasp of learning theories and pedagogical concepts, training others, conducting needs assessments, and facilitating plans to meet those needs. Thus, she was pleasantly surprised to find how much of her teaching background equipped her with transferable skills for her new role as instructional designer. There is, however, a learning curve to the new position – as one would expect with any new role – particularly with the tools, procedures, and oh-so-many acronyms unique to her institution. Yet understanding how her background and experience qualifies her for this position allows her to weather the growing pains of this career shift (and any associated imposter syndrome) with appreciation, gratitude, and confidence that she deserves to be in this role. Asmaa is optimistic about the future of ID work in the ever-evolving field of education, particularly as it applies to the many nuances and educational needs within the growing area of eLearning.

Conclusion & Future Work

Despite their varied educational and professional backgrounds, Javier, Laz, and Asmaa's success stories share many notable features. Each came to their new role with a graduate degree, albeit in different subjects, which aligns with prior research on ID job requirements (North et al., 2021; Surrency et al., 2019; Bean 2014). They also had significant experience in education: Javier as a graduate student teacher, Laz as a high school teacher, and Asmaa as a teacher and instructional coach. Though the three had different reasons for making this professional transition, their experience also overlaps in at least two key ways. First, all three found deep similarities between the nature of (and skills necessary for) their previous teaching work and their new role – although they also found this underlying overlap to be obscured (at least initially) by disciplinary and institutional differences in languages and terminology. Second, all three found the process of finding and applying for ID work to be complex and required substantially longer than initially expected. Not only did these IDs need to develop mastery over discipline- and position-specific vocabulary, but they also had to learn new job search tools, techniques, and resources for the field. Moreover, they relied on personal resolve, community support, and faith to navigate an evolving job market.

As they began to settle into their new roles, Javier, Laz, and Asmaa all expressed optimism about the field. They felt the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increased emphasis on online teaching and highlighted the value of ID work. Furthermore, they are intrigued by the various ways that work might now continue growing (e.g., further integration of ID support into the greater higher education community, advances in gamification and virtual learning experiences, and the continued expansion of eLearning).

The authors hope related future work includes additional study of the ID role. This could include longitudinal investigations of promotion pathways within (or outside of) the field, differences between industries (e.g., higher education, corporate, not-for-profit), and quantitative research on the impacts of resume screening tools on the ID job search. As IDs rely upon each other for professional support (Pollard & Kumar, 2022, p. 7), the authors encourage those in the field to continue sharing their experiences and successes.

References

Bean, C. (2014). *The accidental instructional designer*. ASTD Press.

BLS: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2022a, April 18). *Instructional coordinators*. Occupational Outlook Handbook. https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/instructional-coordinators.htm

BLS: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2022b, April 18). *Training and development specialists*. Occupational Outlook Handbook. https://www.bls.gov/ooh/business-and-financial/training-and-development-specialists.htm

Cech, E. A., & Hiltner, S. (2022). Unsettled employment, reshuffled priorities? Career prioritization among college-educated workers facing employment instability during Covid-19. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, *8*. https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231211068660

Decherney, P., & Levander, C. (2020, April 24). *The hottest job in higher education: Instructional designer*. Inside Higher Education. https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/blogs/education-time-corona/hottest-job-higher-education-instructional-designer

Foster School of Business. (2015, September). *Interview Prep*. University of Washington. https://foster.uw.edu/careers/career-services/undergraduate-students/interview-prep/

Fuller, J. B., Raman, M., Sage-Gavin, E., & Hines, K. (2021). *Hidden workers: Untapped talent*. Harvard Business School. https://www.hbs.edu/managing-the-future-of-work/Documents/research/hiddenworkers09032021.pdf

Gallup. (2022, June 13). *Poll: K-12 workers have highest burnout rate in U.S.* https://news.gallup.com/poll/393500/workers-highest-burnout-rate.aspx

Glover, I. (2013). *Play as you learn: Gamification as a technique for motivating learners*. 1999–2008. https://www.learntechlib.org/p/112246/

Intentional Futures. (2016). *Instructional Design in Higher Education*. https://tinyurl.com/2016-if

Lebson, C. (2022). *The UX careers handbook* (Second edition). CRC Press.

Levinson, J. C., & Perry, D. (2011). *Guerrilla marketing for job hunters 3.0: How to stand out from the crowd and tap into the hidden job market using social media and 999 other tactics today*. Wiley.

NEA: National Education Association. (2022). *Poll results: Stress and burnout pose threat of educator shortages*. https://bit.ly/nea-2022

North, C., Shortt, M., Bowman, M. A., & Akinkuolie, B. (2021). How instructional design is operationalized in various industries for job-seeking learning designers: Engaging the talent development capability model. *TechTrends*, *65*(5), 713–730. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-021-00636-2

Pollard, R., & Kumar, S. (2022). Instructional designers in higher education: Roles, challenges, and supports. *Journal of Applied Instructional Design*. https://doi.org/10.51869/111/rp

Reyna, J. (2022). *A practical guide to learning design in higher education disciplines*. 1068–1077. https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/221413/

Roubides, P. (2016). Emergent pathways for the future of instructional design. *International Journal of Online Pedagogy and Course Design*, *6*(1), 42–59. https://www.learntechlib.org/p/186376/

Stefaniak, J., & Reese, R. (2022). *The instructional design trainer's guide: Authentic practices and considerations for mentoring id and ed tech professionals* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003109938

Stefaniak, J., Reese, R., & McDonald, J. (2020). Design considerations for bridging the gap between instructional design pedagogy and practice. *Journal of Applied Instructional Design*, *9*(3). https://doi.org/10.51869/93jsrmrjkmd

Surrency, M., Churchill, C., Sanchez, M., & Scott, J. (2019). *Content analysis of higher education instructional design job postings: Required and preferred qualifications*. 1060–1074. https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/211186/

The University of Chicago. (2019). *Careers in instructional design*. The Graduate School. https://grad.uchicago.edu/career-development/career-development-resources/

Zielinski, D. (2022, March 8). *Is your applicant tracking system hurting your recruiting efforts?* SHRM. https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/spring2022/