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# Instructional Design: Study of a Widening Scope of Practice

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## Abstract

Instructional design continues to evolve and demonstrates positive growth. Understanding of the field remains limited by relative novelty, simplistic definitions, and linear depictions. This study investigates the current state of practice to reveal a wide scope, a diverse range of functions and specializations present in instructional design. The chiefly quantitative study included more than 250 subjects surveyed in early 2018. Demographics in the subject pool confirmed data indicated by other sources, of Instructional Design as a predominately female field with highly educated practitioners. Data shows a population engaged in many functions not typically associated with accepted definitions of the field. Subjects are commonly positioned as leaders, specializing in particular types of learning design. Other results confirmed findings in prior studies, updated understandings in other research, and suggested progress was made in previously noted areas.

## Introduction

In this study, we investigated the current state of instructional design practice with an analysis of demographic data including experience in the field, education, role, specialization, and approaches to design, as well as possible connections between data points. Though questions have been asked in the literature with regard to instructional design over the past few decades (Gray et al., 2015) the continued evolution of the field itself, driven by technology, growth in online education, and lack of understanding (Smith & Boling, 2009), calls for in-depth analysis. The instructional design field continues to grow, and its practitioners are impacting education across a spectrum of environments.

As of 2014, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) indicated that most instructional designers possess graduate degrees, and projected an average annual rate of growth of 7% through 2024. Intentional Futures (2016) identified 13,000 instructional designers, 67% of whom are female, working in higher education. Intentional Futures (2016) concurred with BLS data regarding education, finding 87% of designers possess graduate degrees and 32% have doctorates. While BLS data and Intentional Futures (IF) agree on the fundamental work of instructional designers, IF identified three additional purposes: management, training, and support. These three additions are situated within a scope of producing “instructional materials and courses, particularly for digital delivery” (Intentional Futures, 2016, p. 3). Literature indicates that other functions and purposes are often served by instructional designers. The precise mix of duties and scope is unique by organization (Bean, 2014; Miller, 2007; Sharif & Cho, 2015). Additional research assigns pivotal importance to instructional design personnel and suggests that designers should act upon higher education, to bring about cultural and organizational shifts, while preserving the integrity and quality of instruction (Campbell, Schwier, & Kenny, 2009; Ross & Morrison, 2012).

Smith and Ragan (1993) defined instructional design simply as “the systematic process of translating principles of learning and instruction into plans for instructional materials and activities” (p. 2); we accept this definition as representative. However, the broad scope of practice and the importance of instructional design work indicate a need to discover the ways designers are engaged with the planning and design of learning. This work will address the purpose and questions, which guided our study and offer a concise review of relevant themes from the literature. Methods, sampling procedures, and results are also presented and discussed.

## **Research Questions and Purpose**

Our purpose is to explore the roles which instructional designers serve and their area of specialization relative to learning design type (e.g., online, classroom, blended instruction development). Additionally, we seek to discover the prevalence of work beyond a traditional instructional design scope.

Our focus and resulting discoveries, while directly addressing instructional design, should not be considered exclusive to this field. Faculty (tenure-track and adjunct), administrators, faculty development, eLearning, instructional design, assessment, and curriculum review staff share a goal of advancing the mission of higher education and would therefore also be appropriate audiences for our findings. This research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What role do instructional designers serve in addition to Instructional Design (e.g., project management, media production, coding, system administration, consultation, contracting/legal agency), as defined by Smith and Ragan (1993)?
2. Do instructional designers specialize in an environment, working exclusively with online, classroom, hybrid/blended, and/or other project types?
3. To what degree do the roles served by instructional designers contribute to leadership experience?

By answering these questions, we intended to develop a nuanced understanding of modern instructional design. Findings also indicate trends within the instructional design profession, emerging competencies, and indicate future paths for instructional design’s impact on education. The information derived may assist in determining how instructional designers work and contribute to workforce ecosystems and organizations. This study also provides updates on earlier investigations.

## **Review of Literature**

The importance of learning design and happenings in higher education indicate an increasingly urgent need to investigate and carefully consider the role of the instructional designer and practice in the field. Issues of note are rampant growth in online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2016), the proliferation of new technologies (Kim, Hannafin, & Bryan, 2007), and learning environments that cover a spectrum between classroom and online instruction. These factors have complicated the intricate process of teaching and learning and cloud our understanding of what an instructional designer does, as well as how this activity is impacting education organizations. Moreover, the way in which instructional designers are situated likely results in a diverse range of functions within their purview to meet needs within their respective setting.

Advancements in technology, evolution of student needs, and growing knowledge of learning drive current instructional design practice. Richey, Fields, and Foxon (2001) identified four roles for an instructional designer as that of analyst, evaluator, e-learning specialist, and project manager. Further, they acknowledged the emergence of e-learning and provided an update on earlier efforts of the late 1970s and mid-80s. However, theirs and other assessments of the instructional designer role

fail to account for technological, learning, and interpersonal expertise crucial to success in a modern context. Despite a tapering in online course enrollment growth in recent years, an upward trend continues; millions of students enrolled in higher education now study exclusively online (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The composition of the student audience and their needs are also evolving. The Council of Graduate Schools survey results indicated graduate student populations are on the rise with a 5% increase in first time, international graduate enrollees in 2014, and a continual annual increase in domestic graduate enrollments (Allum, 2014). Therefore, when considering competencies, mastery over existing technologies, understanding of learning, and continued exploration cannot be discounted.

Comparing instructional design with other fields (Gibbons, 2003; Gibby et al., 2002), may actually obscure, rather than clarify, our understanding of it. Comparison, especially with engineering, coupled with depictions of instructional design including linear processes and flow charts (Lohr & Ursyn, 2010), suggest a highly prescribed practice. Instead, design may be much more like a “special kind of problem-solving” (Simon, 1998, p. 345), not subject to rules in the same fashion as engineering, but requiring an intermingling of skills and characteristics possessed by practitioners (Hatcher, 2008).

Future instructional design practice must acknowledge its origins, indicate models as guides, and account for a changed world. Considering factors such as the popularity of online learning and the rise of technology creates an impetus to investigate the ways learning experiences are created. Practice should allow for creativity and flexibility aimed at the best results. Unique needs within an organization and the skillsets of instructional designers therein may also allow practitioners to be tapped for a wide array of purposes. The current situation calls for an instructional designer to be “a consultant...someone who adds value and doesn’t just take orders” (Bean, 2014, p. 37). This may create conflict between a subject matter expert’s skill and the expertise a designer possesses (Tate, 2017). Instructional designers need to simultaneously inform and make subject matter experts feel comfortable, to involve them in the design process, and empower them to contribute, in order to yield the best results and avoid challenges (Ashbaugh, 2013; Tate, 2017). Among institutions of higher education where such support is available, just 31% require faculty designing online learning experiences to work with instructional designers (Quality Matters, 2018).

Also, despite being trained chiefly to serve in a supportive capacity, leadership may also be a key part of the instructional designer’s role (Ashbaugh, 2013; Boyle, 2011). Recent findings of Gardner, Chongwony, and Washington (2018), indicated nearly one in five designers have several years of leadership experience. The implications of this evolution and complexity of the instructional designers role are key and highlight the need for more research into the evolving role of the instructional designer as well as the preparation of individuals in the field.

## **Effective Instructional Design Practice**

Bean (2014) asked the same question of every instructional designer who visited her blog: Do you have a degree in instructional design? Of the 650 respondents, 65% (423) indicated that they did *not* possess a degree in instructional design, but were working in the field. Arguments against the methods underpinning the findings of Bean (2014) notwithstanding, the data point nevertheless hints at the possibility that formal instructional design education is not critical to practice. Of course, as is the case in any field, a combination of elements contribute to success, including education, training, and professional development, evolution of the field, personal attributes, skills, experience, and the expectations and role of each individual position. In the following sub-sections, literature related respectively to instructional design education, professional development, and role will be explored as each relates to supporting effective practice.

### **Education and professional development.**

Whether instructional designers possess formal instructional design education is an interesting question. Of equal interest is whether education in instructional design is valued by those who possess it, relative to performance of their work. For example, project management is often indicated in the research as an important competency for instructional designers (Bean, 2014; Gibby, Quiros, Demps, & Liu, 2002; Van Rooij, 2010). Yet, project management is not a common part of instructional design curricula. In fact, among 500 domestic and 100 international instructional design programs, Van Rooij (2010) found just 23% included project management. Considering programs also claimed adherence to guidelines of the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance, and Instruction that include project management (Van Rooij, 2010), these findings are especially concerning. The ability to manage not only projects but likewise to demonstrate other leadership attributes is also of paramount importance (Ashbaugh, 2013; Van Rooij, 2010).

The content of typical instructional design curricula also poses a challenge. Many “classic instructional design textbooks illustrate the design process using flowcharts that depict a logical and linear process” (Lohr & Ursyn, 2010, p. 428). While this approach may be useful to introduce instructional design to novices, it undesirably portrays design as consistent, rule-based, and void of creativity (2010). In fact, instructional design is complex and, as Simon (1998) described, is a “special kind of problem-solving” (p. 345) that requires a variety of skills and characteristics (Hatcher, 2008). Sharif and Cho (2015) aptly concluded “that there is a discrepancy between the way instructional design is taught and practiced in real-world situations” (p. 80). As opposed to following steps and adhering to a model, instructional designers can serve elevated purposes, bringing about change through design and relationships with those who utilize their services (Yusop & Correia, 2012). Changes in instructional design curriculum may be necessary in order to have instructional designers “understand both the psychology of learners and the structure of knowledge” (Miller, 2007, p. 491). Instructional design education should also include significant project and personnel management training.

### **The Instructional Designer Role**

As noted earlier, Smith and Ragan (1993) defined instructional design as “the systematic process of translating principles of learning and instruction into plans for instructional materials and activities” (p. 2). This singularity of purpose should be challenged. Readily apparent in the literature is the reality that a minority of instructional designers exclusively function as such. Sharif and Cho (2015) found just 23% of designers (n=60) were exclusively practicing instructional design. The largest group, 39%, indicated “other” for their respective role when presented with options including instructional designer, course designer/developer, instructional support/media developer, and instructor (Sharif & Cho, 2015). Gibby, Quiros, Demps, and Liu (2002) discovered a similar trend, noting more than half of the instructional designers interviewed (n=11) were also project and personnel managers, responsible for assembling talent, allocating resources and performing other duties. Intentional Futures (2016) concurred, finding designers engaged in project management, quality assurance testing, technology training, and even promoting faculty and student services. While Intentional Futures (2016), Sharif and Cho (2015), and Gibby, Quiros, Demps and Liu (2002) fundamentally agreed on the finding that instructional designers function in other ways, only Intentional Futures (2016) probed the “other” factor to partially determine what else, and to what degree, designers were involved in additional functions. Nevertheless, if a majority of instructional designers function beyond the recognized scope of instructional design, this indicates a potential need to expand or redefine the meaning of instructional design.

Many instructional designers are also not known by the instructional designer job title. Ganzel (1997) indicated “more muscular phrases” (p. 14) such as multimedia producer, webmaster, and developer of online learning are preferred. Intentional Futures (2016) found instructional design job titles generally followed a formula including “an education-related prefix, a technical root word, and a descriptive suffixed noun” (p. 8). Differing position titles may also suggest various interpretations of the role and the metaphorical wearing of many hats. Miller (2007) moved beyond dissection of

title and suggested the emergence of specializations, relative to when an instructional designer is engaged – early, in the design of learning experiences, or later in the execution of those experiences. Miller (2007) offered that “we are almost all products of a system that expects educators...to know their subject well but expects very little with respect to understanding learning process” (p. 484). It is therefore possibly necessary for instructional designers to both design and manage learning experiences. For this reason, Miller (2007) asserted two defined roles – that of instructional designer and another of learning manager. The claim is qualified by recognizing two fundamental questions in the field, “how to design courses and...how to manage education to ensure that real long-term educational goals are met” (p. 485). The distinction Miller (2007) made is one of timing but also one of impact. The specializations Miller (2007) offered begs the question whether a designer is acting on creation or operation, and whether on a single experience or course versus a broader scope (e.g., degree program, curriculum). The argument for specialization is reasonably clear but calls for consideration and purpose as opposed to a default related to less relevant factors such as institutional constraints.

Miller (2007) also introduced an expectation for the instructional designer to be “an expert in online pedagogy” (p. 486); though it is also noted that the expertise of a designer and that of a subject matter expert can sometimes lead to conflicts (Miller, 2007; Tate, 2017). The shared aim of meeting educational goals is the connection between faculty and designer. However, shared responsibility for addressing that aim can further challenge the designer’s role as an expert who best understands “the most effective ways of sequencing and presenting content so that learning proceeds smoothly” (Miller, 2007, p. 492), an understanding faculty may believe they possess. Some components of an instructional designer’s role can then understandably contribute to a subject matter expert’s fears of losing control of her or his courses and content (Tate, 2017). The functional conflict between designer and subject matter expert is a reasonable pivot to branch from one-to-one interactions with faculty expected of designers and discuss instead further reaching impacts of instructional design.

Though sharing with Miller (2007) a perspective of instructional design’s function of meeting educational goals, Campbell, Schwier, and Kenny (2009) inquired beyond dividing the role by function, instead indicating a model of change agency. Through semi-structured interview and narrative inquiry, four domains were surfaced: interpersonal, societal, professional, and institutional (Campbell, Schwier, & Kenny, 2009). This investigation concluded “designers are not technicians that primarily implement techniques and principles, but principled actors whose practices embody core values” (p. 661). Additional examples from the literature recognize leadership contributions and indicate future potential growth in this area. Ashbaugh (2013) noted instructional design work to eliminate ineffective practices and introduce effective methods places practitioners at the forefront of educational transformation. The implications of these findings are that designers are often acting outside learning design and at an organizational level. Instructional designers, through consultation, agency, and mentorship, are, in fact, positioned to potentially impact organizational change. To promote effective instructional design practices, a case has been made herein for exploration in as many as three areas. First, practitioners’ measure of their instructional design education’s success at preparing them for practice requires investigating. Focus may also be needed on developing the skills necessary for creating rapport and establishing trust (Tate, 2017) and expertise in the science of learning itself (Bean, 2014; Hatcher, 2008; Miller, 2007; Sahin, 2009). Finally, though not of least importance, is to reconsider the way instructional designers are believed to be positioned within organizations and how those beliefs differ from actual contexts.

Improving understanding of the instructional designer’s role, and the value of education in their preparation for practice will yield a more complete picture of the field and how to best leverage professionals therein within educational organizations. Improved understanding could then be leveraged to forge a commitment to transparency from organizational leaders responsible for driving the purpose and role of instructional design and afford those practicing in the field a much more complete sense of where they may contribute.

## Methods

In January of 2018, a survey was conducted via email invitation to listserv lists including those of the Michigan Blackboard Users Group (MiBUG), University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA), Arizona State University Blackboard Users Group, Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network, and a list which included a state-by-state directory of individuals in teaching and learning/e-learning/instructional design leadership roles. The survey was formatted as a web-based questionnaire, used to efficiently collect data from a large number of respondents (Trochim, 2006; DeFranzo, 2012). The survey instrument was developed to obtain quantitative data and thereby to collect information about instructional designers and others working in the instructional design field with other job titles. Items were adapted with permission from surveys conducted previously by Intentional Futures (2016) and Sharif and Cho (2015). Underlying concepts were also drawn from the prior work of Miller (2007) and Gibby, Quiros, Demps, and Liu (2002). Information collected includes individual characteristics (e.g., gender, education), experience, education, roles, and practice. Survey questions also identify in which other capacities instructional designers serve, and the functions of the individuals they manage.

## Sample Procedures

Prior to the delivery of the survey, it was piloted among the instructional design staff of a Midwestern university's teaching and learning center, a cohort of educational technology doctoral students, and faculty. Following the pilot and implementation of suggested edits, the link was distributed as described previously. The intent was to invite thousands of different individuals to partake, to attract a significant sample. While the sample was chiefly one of convenience, as participants were selected because they were willing and available (Creswell, 2015), snowball sampling was also utilized, as some recipients of the initial invitation were asked to forward the invitation to others whom they believe may match the criteria sought (Goodman, 1961).

Qualtrics® was used to create and host the web-based survey instrument. Data was collected for a period of four weeks, wherein a reminder was sent two weeks following the original invitation. Two weeks following the reminder, the survey was closed to further response. The survey instrument consisted of four question blocks and used conditional branching to assure that individuals who met specific criteria were exposed to a certain set of questions. The first block contained two questions, the first soliciting consent from participants and the second soliciting their confirmation of current work "in an instructional design role (including management of instructional designers)..." Subjects who answered each of these in the affirmative advanced to the second block of seven questions, consisting of demographic and employment experience items including gender, level of employment, and education. The third question block included a segment opened only to those subjects indicating management of others. Questions therein asked about the individuals they managed, items regarding function, roles served, investment of time in instructional design, specialization, and inquiry relating to design models. A fourth question block, soliciting the subjects' willingness to be interviewed concluded the survey.

## Results

Two hundred ninety-seven (297) individuals responded to the survey, yielding 254 completed surveys. More than 95% (242) of all subjects,  $n=254$ , indicated being employed full-time. Formal instructional design education was indicated by 70% (178) of subjects; 59 specified not having formal education in the field. Collectively, the group is well educated, with 61% (153) possessing a graduate degree and 29% (72) having doctorates. Education was looked upon favorably, relative to preparing individuals for their work. When asked how many aspects of instructional design practice for which respondents felt prepared by their education, 16% (31) indicated being prepared for all aspects. Another 47% (91) indicated having been prepared for most aspects of instructional design work; only five subjects indicating preparedness for only a few aspects of practice. Years in the field

varied considerably across the group. Sixty-nine subjects (27%) indicated less than five years of service; another 75 (30%) responded with 5-10 years of experience. Only 11% (28) of subjects possessed 21 years or more experience.

Three research questions were explored through an analysis of the survey data. The following seeks to surface the many roles instructional designers serve, in addition to instructional design, if areas of specialization are present, as well as how design models are used and governed in practice.

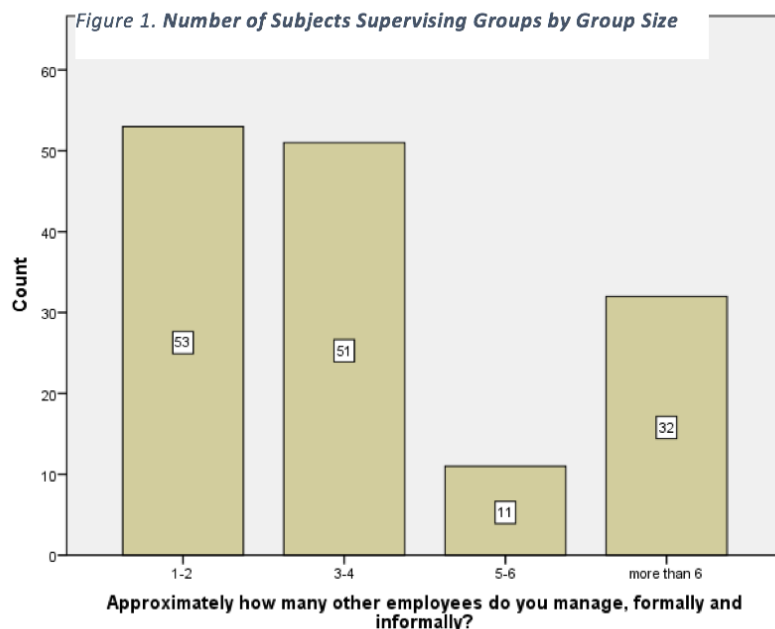
Research Question 1: What role do instructional designers serve in addition to Instructional Design, as defined by Smith and Ragan (1993)?

Many respondents indicated that they took on additional responsibilities. For each of the following items 50% or more reported having to perform one or more of the following functions (listed in order of frequency):

1. Faculty development (206)
2. Project Management (179)
3. Committee Work (157)
4. Manage others (152)
5. Tech Support (128)

When asked “how much of your time at work is invested in instructional design activities, not including management of other instructional designers?” subjects (n = 242) responded somewhat evenly across the options presented. Slightly less than one in five (19.42%, 47) indicated less than 20%; 21.9% invest 21-40% of their time in instructional design. Those working on instructional design 41-60% and 61-80% of the time accounted for 18.6% (45) each, while the remaining 21.49% (52) pursue instructional design with more than 80% of their work time.

Subjects (n=251) were also asked to indicate whether they manage other employees formally, informally, both, or not at all. Nearly 61% (152) manage other employees, formally (63), informally (70), or both (19). Those who specified these responsibilities (n=147) were further asked to share the approximate number of employees they manage. Nearly three-fourths of the group who manage (71%) oversee relatively small teams of four or fewer individuals. The largest single group (21.9%, 53) supervise teams of just 1-2 people.



Despite the array of functional roles presented, twenty-eight subjects selected “Other” and shared additional inputs. These other functions, each accounting for 0.4% of the total, clustered in certain areas. The largest cluster of seven respondents indicated strategic responsibilities related to marketing, external advocacy for their department, social media authoring, and website management. Five subjects indicated involvement with compliance, assessment, and/or accreditation. Another four specified additional administrative work including academic program oversight and process improvement. Two individuals shared duties typically associated with librarians: “reference, research consultations” and “library instruction and research help.” Other pairs wrote respectively of authoring policies and procedures, supporting faculty with technology, and curricular development.

To support further analysis, an additional variable was created from subject responses to the specialization question (item 14: other functions/roles). The new variable, diversification score, represents a sum based upon one point for each of the ten additional functions selected in item 14. The purpose of the diversification score is to quantify additional duties of instructional designers. A maximum value of 10 and a minimum value of 0 were possible; an n of 258 was noted, with a mode value of 5. A large majority, 93.4% (241) had scores of 1 or greater, indicating some function in addition to instructional design; just 6% (17) selected no additional functions. More than half (51%, 132) of subjects indicated involvement in five or more additional functions.

Research Question 2: Do instructional designers specialize in an environment, working exclusively with online, classroom, hybrid/blended, and/or other project types?

When asked to choose from options which best described their area of specialization, subjects (n=242) indicated a majority dedicated to online learning design (58.26%, 141). The second largest group (30.58%, 74) specified being generalists, selecting “general learning design including classroom, online, and blended.” Thirteen subjects (5.37%) specialized in blended learning design. Just four subjects, 1.65%, indicated specialization in classroom learning design. Ten respondents selected “Other” and specified unique areas of focus including ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) support, learning environment design, language learning design, curriculum/program design and assessment, intercultural competence, quality assurance, and distance library services.

Research Question 3: To what degree do the roles served by instructional designers contribute to leadership experience?

To determine the degree of specialization as management, a leadership score was calculated based upon responses to survey items 10 (do you manage other employees?), 11 (how many other employees do you manage?), as well as selections made on items 14 (functions in addition to instructional design) and 17 (creator of model in use, authority to make change to model(s)). Specifically, an answer of “yes, informally...” to item 10 contributed one point to a subject’s leadership score. Selecting “yes, formally” contributed two points to the score; selecting “yes, formally and informally” added three. For item 11, responses of 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, or more than 6, indicating the approximate number of staff managed, respectively contributed 1, 2, 3, or 4 additional points. Item 14 solicited from respondents their respective additional functions from ten possible options. Those subjects indicated functions of Committee work (e.g., assessment/accreditation councils, oversight groups), Personnel management (e.g., hiring, performance review), or Project management, added one point each to their score. A last contributing factor depends on responses to item 17, which inquired about the ownership of design models in their setting. Subjects indicating “I create(d) the model/models my team and I use”, or “I have authority to make changes to the design model(s)” had an additional point for each item. A maximum value of 12 and a minimum value of 0 were possible. An n of 259 was achieved, with a mode of 5.

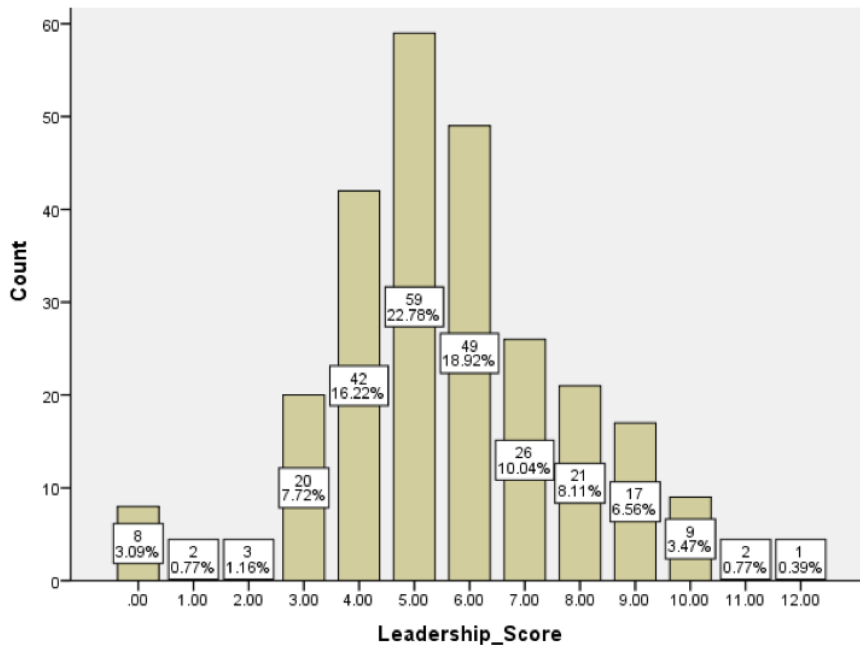
To further consider the meaning of this score, subjects were grouped into three categories: low-range (<5), mid-range (5-8), and high (>8) scores as a manner to consider their overall level of leadership



responsibility. Nearly sixty percent (59.8%,  $n = 155$ ) scored in the mid-range, while 11.1% ( $n = 29$ ) were high-range scorers (Figure 3). This combined sample, indicates more than seventy percent of the subjects are considerably involved in leadership, including project management, supervision of others, committee work and design model/process development or ownership.

To explore whether a designer’s experience contributed to the potential of involvement in leadership, a Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for Leadership Score and years of experience in instructional design (survey item 9). A weak positive correlation was found ( $r(249) = .184, p < .003$ ), indicating a linear relationship between the two variables (more years of experience indicates more leadership function in some cases).

Figure 2. A Majority of the Subjects Indicate Leadership Involvement



## Discussion

The survey results yielded considerable information regarding the characteristics and practice of the subject group. Though statistical significance was not found in the majority of the analysis, some relevant discoveries did emerge. Insight was also obtained with respect to the research questions posed in the study, and therefore into the current state of instructional design.

Instructional designers are called upon to perform myriad other functions in their positions. In fact, only about 1 in 5 respondents invest a large majority of their time on instructional design work. The other 4 in 5 engaged in instructional design less than 80% of the time and fully 40% of the group utilize only a minor portion of the group utilize only a minor portion (<40%) of their time on design. This data suggests a great deal of an instructional designer’s time is often purposed elsewhere. In the case of this sample, other purposes were many and represent a wide scope of practice. The most popular pursuits among respondents included work as faculty developers, including the creation and offering of workshops and other training opportunities. Project management work was, not surprisingly, commonplace, confirming findings from Van Rooij (2010) stating its inseparability from instructional design. Other prevalent functions included committee work, such as assessment or accreditation councils and other oversight groups, technical support, audio/video editing, graphic design, teaching, scholarly activity, and management of personnel. Curiously, 89 respondents (34%) indicated the latter function, personnel management, though when asked about management of employees in item 10, a combined 60.56% selected some type of affirmative option. The discrepancy is partially accounted for by the notions of formal and informal

management of others presented in item 10, wherein informal management was defined as “employees do not report to me, but I assign work to them.” The combined responses of formal and both formal and informal management of others accounted for 32.67%, a figure considerably closer to the 34% value surfaced in item 17 regarding various functions.

Management and other leadership activities were also prevalent among the subject group. Of the 61% who lead others, approximately 1 in 5 are overseeing teams of six or more individuals. However, the largest group of leaders oversee only small teams of one or two other individuals, which is relatively consistent with the finding of Gardner, Chongwony, and Washington (2018), which indicated 61% of the surveyed instructional designers lead one to three others. Additional leadership activities were also commonplace, as demonstrated by involvement in committee work, autonomy regarding practice, and other areas. Ashbaugh (2013) concluded in part that leadership is controversial among designers, as most are trained in a supportive capacity, but went on to call for recognition of leadership to support effective practice. Five years hence, perhaps these findings demonstrate visible results.

Specialization of instructional design practice, relative to the learning environment, was also typical of the subject group. A majority, more than 58%, work in online learning development. Focus in this arena is perhaps not surprising as institutions move to quickly expand their presence in this space, in a scalable fashion such as that described by Brown (2018), wherein designers can plan their workloads and understand in advance the number of projects they will address. The second largest group are what could be considered generalists, working across a range of learning environments including online, classroom, and blended approaches. The way in which designers apply their skills appears to be largely driven by pre-determined approaches, or models, wherein a combined 61% of subjects are using the same model with each learning design project, perhaps varying it only slightly, case-by-case. One-fourth of subjects have a more flexible paradigm, indicating the exact model utilized varies greatly by project. The most open approach, an indication of no formal model whatsoever was indicated by just over 13% of subjects.

## **Implications and Conclusions**

Our survey results indicated instructional design remains a field made up of well-educated individuals who perceive education as serving to prepare them for work in the field. Prevalence of graduate and doctoral credentials held by the respondents supports the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) and Intentional Futures (2016) data, but contradicts less comprehensive findings of Bean (2014). The implication for those considering entry into the field is in favor of pursuit of graduate education. Though, curiously, education level was not a significant predictor of leadership or diversification of role in our subject pool, which may suggest a graduate degree is more or less a standard for instructional design but is not a predictor or guarantee of advancement.

In addition, with respect to our sample and specialization, it appears most designers concentrate their efforts on online and blended learning design, with only a small number focusing on classroom learning. This could reflect a limitation in our study which resulted from soliciting involvement using lists associated with the use of LMSs and organizations geared toward extended and continuing education. Nevertheless, given that most study, particularly among K-12 learners, occurs in classrooms, an increase in focus in practice on these settings may be needed. Design practice itself generally occurs through the use of a single pre-determined model, used with each project, varying only slightly case-by-case for most designers.

Another clear implication of our research is the expectation for instructional design professionals to perform a range of functions. A majority of designers also act as leaders. Many also serve as faculty developers, faculty themselves, technologists, media creators, and scholars; more than 10% of subjects indicated still other functions ranging from marketing to ADA compliance. To succeed, one can expect to contribute in multiple ways to the design and support of learning.

In summary, instructional design continues to evolve as a field, wherein practitioners are situated in leadership roles and making contributions across a range of functional areas. A qualitative approach, to inquire as to individual experiences, leadership opportunities, and diversity of function may offer a more complete explanation for our discoveries. Further exploration into other areas could be likewise illuminating. Specifically, probing of the relationship between the application of models to learning design and the basis for the one-size-fits-almost-all trend apparent in our findings could surface further insight into the decision-making processes within design practice, to build on Gray et al. (2015).

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