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Becoming an Expert Instructional Designer

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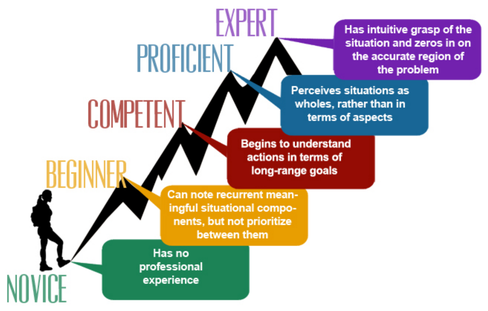
Instructional Design

Instructional design requires practitioners to integrate best practices, use appropriate tools, and strategically apply current and emerging technologies to meet clients' and organizations' needs. Many practitioners achieve high levels of *technical* expertise in this way. However, the author of this poster suggests that, to become a *leader* in instructional design, practitioners must develop as experts through a process of acquiring *horizontal expertise* via two concepts described by Engeström, Engeström, & Kärkkäinen (1995). Polycontextuality describes how experts accomplish multiple simultaneous tasks within multiple communities of practices. Boundary crossing occurs when two different activities are linked together.

Vertical Expertise

Traditional perspectives regard the acquisition of expertise as a vertical process. Collins (1990, p. 4) distinguishes between two opposite approaches:

- An 'algorithmic model,' in which knowledge is clearly statable and transferable in something like the form of a recipe.
- An 'enculturational model,' where the process has more to do with unconscious social contagion."



Horizontal Expertise

While vertical expertise has long been an area of research, Engeström, Engeström, & Kärkkäinen (1995) argue for "…a broader, multi-dimensional view of expertise. The vertical dimension remains important, but a horizontal dimension is increasingly relevant for the acquisition of expertise. "...experts operate in and move between multiple parallel activity contexts [that] demand and afford different, complementary [and] conflicting cognitive tools, rules and patterns of social interaction. The criteria of expert knowledge and skill are different in the various contexts. Experts face the challenge of negotiating and combining ingredients from different contexts to achieve hybrid solutions. The vertical relationship, and with it, in some cases, the professional monopoly on expertise is problematized as demands for dialogical problem solving increase" (p. 319).

Boundary Crossing

Boundary crossing occurs when the process of solving a problem between different activity contexts reaches a crucial point where the tools, languages, rules, and social relations of the affected contexts have little in common. To continue solving the problem(s), the contexts must be iteratively connected. Participants in at least one of the contexts must become boundary crossers. Suchman pointed out "crossing boundaries involves encountering difference, entering onto territory in which we are unfamiliar and, to some extent therefore, unqualified" (1994, p.25).
The act of crossing boundaries between activity contexts "calls for the formation of new mediating concepts. In this sense, boundary crossing my be analyzed as a process of collective concept formation" (Engeström, Engeström, & Kärkkäinen, 1995, p. 321). In other words, boundary-crossers must, at some level, attempt to become experts within unfamiliar activity contexts in order to continue solving complex problems and developing hybrid solutions.

Learning the Rules

The intersection where instructional designers work to develop horizontal expertise may also be expressed, partially, through a set of "Rules of Instructional Design" (Wood, 2017):

- **Rule #1**: *Learn the rules*. Learn as much as possible about applicable theories, models, activity contexts, client needs, learner needs, etc. Knowing the rules will set the stage for new opportunities, ideas, and breakthroughs and prepare for boundary crossing.
- **Rule #2**: *Creatively break the rules*. Deliberately cross boundaries and make connections that might seem at odds with the rules.
- **Rule #3**: *Make new rules*. Based on the experience and expertise gained from creatively breaking the rules and crossing boundaries, it becomes desirable, even necessary, to formulate new rules (e.g., theories and models) to evolve practices and be able to solve more complex, emerging problems.
- **Rule #4**: *See Rule #1*. Once new rules are formalized, they must be learned in order to set (or reset) the stage, until it's time to creatively break them.

Preparing Graduate ID Students to Cross Boundaries

The concepts that inform boundary crossing did not originate from, and are not specific to, the field of instructional design. However, the premise is that the practices associated with boundary crossing *should* be considered within the context of instructional design practices. Broadly, this premise is about the applicability of boundary crossing in terms of enhancing ID practices. More specifically, it assumes that, to truly become an ID expert/leader, designers must engage consistently in boundary crossing.

Developing "horizontal expertise" has become more of a necessity because of the evolving nature of the work that IDs are being asked to do. It is no longer sufficient for an ID to be a specialist in the field - IDs must be generalists able to adapt, be flexible, and be adept at crossing boundaries.

At Franklin University, the starting point for graduate ID students is the Advanced Instructional Design & Performance Technology course (IDPT 660). During Fall 2017, students began interacting with an assignment series assessed by the following learning outcome: *Hypothesize how the research findings of polycontextuality (boundary crossing) could, or should, apply to the practice of instructional design.* The intent of the series is to, at the least, expand students' perceptions and have them actively consider how and why "boundary crossing" should be an ongoing ID practice. Assessment data will be analyzed to confirm the extent to which students achieve the learning outcome and begin the process of becoming ID leaders via boundary crossing.

References:

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