The eLearning Coach Podcast #67:
Educating the New Instructional Designer
[Episode Resources](#)

Connie: Welcome to The eLearning Coach Podcast, online at theelearningcoach.com. I'm Connie Malamed, bringing you ideas, tips, and best practices for success in creating effective learning experiences.

Hello, learning people, and welcome to episode 67. As our field goes through so many transitions. I think it's time to ask how should instructional designers or learning experience designers be educated to meet the needs of the modern workplace. This episode focuses on the challenges and solutions facing instructional design educators, and it was inspired by a journal article that I read that described a collaboration of three professors teaching introductory instructional design courses in three different institutions and in different modalities. In this session, I speak with Jason McDonald, one of the authors of that paper. Jason is an associate professor at Brigham Young University in the Department of Instructional Psychology and Development. He spent much of his career in the instructional media industry, and now, his research interests include innovation within instructional design practice and improving instructional design education.

At the very end of the podcast, you can hear Jason's son in the background in another room loudly playing a video game with friends. It's very short and I just wanted to let you know what that was. You can find a transcript and the show notes with links to resources at theelearningcoach.com/podcast/67. Here's our conversation.

Welcome to The eLearning Coach Podcast, Jason.

Jason: Thank you. I'm glad to be here, Connie.

Connie: I read an interesting article that you and a few collaborators wrote that was about a research project that you were in to identify how instructional design educators across different institutions teach introductory instructional design. Do I have that right with the introductory aspect?

Jason: Absolutely. Our focus in this particular article was introductory instructional design. In fact, I should recognize my coauthors, Patricia and Atsusi on the article. All three of us teach at the university level in graduate programs, and while we have various experiences teaching different levels of students, this particular case, we were focused on those introductory courses. So many students have that formative experience, even if they have other career paths, and so it seemed like this was a topic that would touch a lot of common interests among other readers or other educators.

Connie: What was the impetus for this project?

Jason: Yeah, so Atsusi and Patricia and I have become friends over the years. We are all members of AECT. It's the Association for Educational Communication and Technology. We've had hallway conversations at conferences, or we'll trade tips about our teaching, and it occurred to us at one point that we really ought to formalize this somehow. I mean, we need to really compare and contrast our experiences, and we also hoped that as we offered this to the academic community, or even to the professional community, that it could even serve as a model for other educators. There's a lot of practical know-how among instructional design educators that I don't think is tapped into and capitalized on, and so we hope to start a conversation among academics or people in industry who train instructional designers, or our team leads of instructional designers. How can we share the practical know-how that we've gained being in

this business with each other and all advance our craft together?

Connie: I love that idea. That's great. Would you say there's a typical university instructional design program, and if so, what would it include?

Jason: Yeah, Connie, that's a great question, and actually, part of our project was to try to figure that out a little bit. I think that there are some really important differences in terms of instructional design programs, particularly when you look at where the students in these programs are going to work. Atsusi, for example, one of the coauthors, he's in Florida. Big military presence there, aerospace. They have certain requirements for their graduates. Patricia, her graduates are often, they go back into classrooms, science, educators, math educators.

The graduates from my program, we have a burgeoning, a strong entrepreneurship culture in the west, right, and so a lot of our graduates go to educational startups, which is a very different need than K-12 systems or the military, and so all of these people, though, are doing instructional design and have needs to improve education, but the environments in which they are going to be working are so different and so various that I do think you see instructional design programs starting to specialize a little bit more where they know where their graduates are going and they try to target how we teach instructional design here at this institution so they can be the most productive and the greatest contributors to those organizations that they'll be working for.

Connie: That is interesting. What about the EdTech degree? Is that really focused on K-12?

Jason: I think a lot of it might, and I can just speak from my experience here, right, but I think a lot of people with what we would

consider an "EdTech degree" do go back into the school systems. I mean, certainly, there's educational technology, startups, and companies that my graduates go work for. The organizations that want our graduates, they want someone with more than just the tech skills, they want people who can speak to some of these core instructional design concerns as well as other team collaboration and team-contributing skills that sometimes we don't typically think about when it comes to EdTech. I mean, that's not to denigrate that profession, obviously, but it's just, I don't think, the focus of people who get those kinds of degrees often.

Connie: Right, right. That's true. On the one hand, they might be leaders in a school system, right, as opposed to in the workplace, you are one-man bands, but you often get onto a team where collaboration is such an important part of it.

Jason: Absolutely. No, that's absolutely true.

Connie: What do you think are some of the most important components from your experience in a graduate program for ID?

Jason: I still am a fan, Connie, of exposing people to the breadth of skills that go into instructional design. It's got to include strong evaluation as a core skill and a core competency. It's got to include some discussion of implementation, or what do we do with these products that we develop. As we all know, I think that one of the killers of any instructional program is that we don't implement it, or there's low implementation fidelity, and so some ability to think through implementation issues is critical. I think it's becoming more important to have a good foundation in design thinking, and how do we prepare students to think creatively and innovatively about educational problems and look for opportunities? The reason these are problems still is because they don't lend themselves to the standard solutions, and so how can we prepare students to think innovatively about

those problems and offer fresh solutions to do things we've been dealing with for a long time?

Connie: I completely agree with you. One of the things we're trying to push, at least in workplace instruction design, is that learning is a journey. It's just like those customer journeys that user experience designers create. It's just so funny, because as a consultant, very few of my clients are interested in that. They want a one-time intervention. Even though it goes against all learning science, that's what they're looking for, and so this design thinking and the whole concept of learning as a journey, that's really the only way you can build competence and proficiency is through repeated instruction and/or practice or coaching or mentoring, something that goes on for a long time. It just drives me crazy because I can't get my clients to do this, but I think in the future, through design thinking and creative thinking and innovation, we'll figure out ways to slip it into work somehow.

Jason: Oh, absolutely. I think you're right on there that this... I love that phrase: This is a journey we want to make sure that we're giving people opportunities, cycles of opportunities to contribute and get better, and so, yeah, one-and-done instructional design just doesn't work. If it ever worked in the past, it doesn't work now.

Connie: Right. When I first got into the field, I was making eight-hour e-learning courses and writing 75-page design documents, and now, I write a two-page design document and nothing goes on for longer than 20 or 30 minutes, so it's just kind of funny, just how things have changed. In your collaboration, did you find that you had some things in common?

Jason: Yeah, that's a great question. We did find some important commonalities between us, Connie. The most important one is that we really all felt strongly about authenticity early in the

program, that instructional design is learned by doing, and so all of us early in our curricula introduced authentic projects in some fashion and asked students to really immerse themselves into real work and real problems.

We've also found that there's an emphasis on integrating curriculum or curricular topics, so in case of my program, for example, we integrate evaluation, we integrate e-learning development into our introductory instructional design course, trying to give students this view that we can't think of these things in silos, these topics as silos anymore.

The third real strong commonality that we found is that all of us really have tried to emphasize that instructional design doesn't happen in a vacuum. There's demands that students will face working in organizations that can be difficult to reconcile, and so all of us have introduced topics in our curricula to help students see these competing demands and negotiate them and navigate them in a crafty, creative way so that they aren't just toeing the line on I do step A and then step B and then step C, but they're really trying to understand how do I adjust myself and what I can offer to fit the organizational context in which I'm working right now.

Connie: I really like that approach. I'm doing an eight-week class now with some members of my Mastering Instructional Design community. When I present an instructional design model, I tell them that it's a flexible framework, and like you were saying, I tell them that they're going to need to adjust it depending on the situation they're in and the problem they're trying to solve. That's a much more realistic reflection of how we work. I, too, have found that people really seem to like when I give them a scenario, rather than creating their own, or they can pick one, because they can't come up with it if they're new, right, and then they just work it through and they love it.

Jason: I think there's really something to say for showing people early in their curriculum that they have the capacities to solve hard problems, that it's not beyond them to do something significant, even with the basic introductory skills they have on week two or week three or week 10 of an introductory course.

Connie: Yeah, that's really true. I imagine that that's really helped people with their confidence. I hadn't thought of that.

Jason: Yeah, it absolutely does.

Connie: Do you find that there are a few instructional design models that are most common to use in graduate programs? I know I never even heard about ADDIE until I got out into the working world.

Jason: Yeah, no, that's an important issue, Connie. I think we're actually seeing more models being commonly taught now. It does seem that you have the Dick and Carey ISD model, or you'd have simplified ADDIE model, and those were really common when I started in graduate school 21 years ago now. Since then, I think that we're seeing more proliferation, or more acceptance of alternative views. I've already alluded to this at my university. We try to teach more of a design thinking model. We still introduce ISD, we still introduce ADDIE because that's still the coin of the realm in so many organizations to be able to speak that language.

Connie: True.

Jason: Right, but we also simultaneously walk students through a design thinking model, too, that's a little more nimble, a little more flexible, offers them a few more options to think about problems and reframe problems in creative ways, and I think that you're seeing that more in instructional design programs is how do we tailor these models that the field has generated so

that they can be custom to the problems that designers are going to be solving in any particular situation.

Connie: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Design thinking has so many tools that we can use in instructional design and merging the two is fascinating, just how you can merge the two, I mean, really do an instructional design practice within that design thinking framework, or vice versa. Sometimes I take the design thinking and put it into the instructional design model.

Jason: Well, and thinking about it as a tool is a great way to think about it. It's actually one of the ways we talk about it with our students is that you're preparing yourself with a set of disciplines, a set of tools that you bring to bear on the problem, and just like you pull out the hammer for some jobs, you pull up the screwdriver for other jobs, you'll pull out the design thinking tools and unique orders, often based on the problem that you're addressing.

Connie: Yes, that is a good way to do it. There's a book, Innovating for People, that explains so many different tools that you can use for design thinking. I'll put it in the show notes. What you had in common, you're saying, was a shared way, at least of expanding the framework, bringing in new types of tools. Were there some things that were pretty unusual because of, perhaps, the specialization between the different programs?

Jason: There were some unique, and I would say the two things that caused us to be unique in our programs, one, of course, yes, like you mentioned, was the industries in which our students work. Another was modality. I am in a program that traditionally has been fully face-to-face still, right? We have actually only initially now started the exploration of do we even become an online program, and so that modality still bring some unique affordances and unique challenges and unique opportunities.

Patricia, my colleague in the paper, only teaches online classes. She's a tenured college professor who has never taught a face-to-face class at the college level, at least, right, and so that again brings some uniqueness to her program because she's a fully online program. Then Atsusi was a mixed modality where he had some face-to-face and some online students in his program and mixed opportunities there, so that presented some uniqueness for each of our programs.

One of them in particular is at Brigham Young University where I work, a studio model. You can do studio online, certainly, but it certainly has also grown out of face-to-face design traditions, and if we had been an online program, I don't know that we would have explored that. I mean, now that we're considering online, we're considering how do we transition our studio to online, obviously, but being face-to-face just lent itself to a studio model, and that was, I think, one of the reasons why it was so important to us to experiment with that and try to pick that up.

Connie: Well, can you explain to listeners what a studio model is?

Jason: Sure, yes. Studio is a form of learning that you see in traditionally artistic fields, as well as more traditional design fields like architecture or industrial design. The pedagogy is, often we talk about in learning, we're going to tell them, we're going to show them, and then they're going to do, right, and the studio almost reverses that. It says first we're going to do, right, so we're going to give students a problem, we're going to give them something to solve, and then we're going to coach them. If they need help, then the instructor may come in and do a demonstration or do it along with them and do some guided practice along with them, and only as a last resort do we tell them, only if it becomes necessary that that student or a group

of students needs more direct instruction do we give something that may look more like a lecture or a discussion.

For those of your listeners who may be familiar with Donald Schon's book, Educating the Reflective Practitioner, there's a great example in there of an architecture teacher, the name is Quist in the book, who coaches the student through the design of her building, how does she lay this building out on a site, and he does it in a very dialogic, back-and-forth kind of question-and-answer way of showing her how he would solve the problem if he was trying to complete this particular assignment.

Connie: Mm-hmm (affirmative). But in your studio model, do people on their own get some kind of basis of knowledge about the topic, or just some way to get started, or is it really very freeform?

Jason: Yeah, so we do give them a few weeks of preparation.

Connie: Okay.

Jason: So four or five weeks or so of preparation, but even within that, they're given a problem, they start to frame the problem, they start to investigate, analyze the audience, the learning population, so on, but by the time that they hit that fourth or fifth week, they're diverging at that point to whatever opportunities they see given the constraints that they have, the resources they have, the talents they're bringing, and it's really unique to see, and actually cool and fun for me as a teacher to see them go so many different directions with what seems to be very simple, common problems.

Connie: Mm-hmm (affirmative), and it's very energetic. I've experienced that in design thinking workshops where the groups get together and the whole room is buzzing. It's really fun. Really, really fun.

Jason: It is. It's a lot of fun, yeah.

Connie: I listen to a podcast called The Observatory from Design Observer. They talk about the studio model and just about how it allows people to understand how messy design is and I just love the term "messy" because there really isn't a better way to describe design.

Jason: There really isn't. "Messy" is a word that we use a lot in our program, and it reflects our experience, right? The problem is not easy. It's not even easy to understand what the problem is sometimes, let alone what the possible solutions are, or how do we fix this thing?

Connie: Yeah. One of the things I like to talk to people about and remind them, and it sounds like in that studio approach, this happens, is that they are designers. A lot of instruction designers don't think of themselves that way and I think it's pretty important.

Jason: Yeah, absolutely. I agree with that completely. We feel very strongly about our students coming away from our program feeling that they have a real design identity, that they're not just hired hands to transfer content from one form to another, but they are offering a new contribution that the organization they're working for, if they could do it without them, they would do without them. We really encourage our students to see themselves as adding important value to the problems that they're asked to help solve.

Connie: Right. Can you compare that studio approach with that guided experiential learning that's discussed in the article, with that approach?

Jason: Sure. Yeah, the guided experiential learning is a model that one of the other programs use that we were contrasting in the article and this was an approach developed by Richard Clark a

number of years ago and his approach is, well, rather than putting students into the true... When we talk about experiential learning, usually we talk about let's just drop students, drop them in the deep end, right, or throw them into a real situation. Clark's supposition is, well, is there a way to support students a little bit more than what we see in truly authentic problems, where there's maybe a high risk of failure, or the problems could be much more complex than we anticipate? And so, he encourages us to design situations, scenarios, so work with experts in this domain to find real scenarios or realistic problems, as well as he calls this "cognitive task analysis," work with the experts to understand what are the cognitive strategies that they use to solve the problem.

Then instead of just dropping students in the deep end and giving them the experience, the instructional designer crafts a situation that allows students to experience that scenario in a more simulated way, a more protected way, more of a sandboxed way, so that could be a computer simulation, certainly, or it could be role-plays, guided cases that they walk through that allow them to still apply those thinking strategies to important problems, right, without it being a truly real-world problem.

There's advantages and disadvantages to both and that's actually one of the things we have continued to debate in our collaboration, the strengths and weaknesses of our approach, where we do typically drop students more into the deep end versus no, let's give them some more guided practice, guided reflection along the way.

Connie: Yeah. I do think that the studio approach really lends itself to face-to-face and it will be interesting to see what, if and when, you end up with some other type of solution online.

Jason: We'll have to do a sequel to this podcast at some point.

Connie: Part two.

Jason: I can maybe brief you on that, yeah.

Connie: Okay. How many years have you been teaching instructional design?

Jason: Yeah, so my current assignment, I've been here five years.

Connie: Okay. How have you seen the world of instructional design changing since you've been in it and what kind of trends do you see?

Jason: Yeah. Well, so I've been teaching it for five years, but I was in the field for a decade and a half before that, right? I mean, I'm in my 21st year now in this profession. When I started, it wasn't the beginning of online learning, but it was pretty close, and it was this Wild West mentality almost of this is new territory. I mean, of course, they were just reinventing the wheel in a lot of cases because computer-based education been around for decades at that point, but it felt brand new to lots of people and it felt like it was uncharted territory.

            But it also felt like the technology wasn't allowing us to do what we wanted to do, right? We had such big appetites, but the tools we had were so limited. I mean, maybe some of your listeners don't remember dial-up modems, right? If someone picks up the phone and suddenly, you're not connected to the Internet anymore in your house, right, and it takes an hour-and-a-half to download a thumbnail video that's 90 seconds long, and so it was really challenging, I think, for people in the online learning space to live up to their ideals, and I think that's why we ended up with so many online textbooks, for lack of a better term, where we're just flipping from page to page, because there wasn't a lot of other alternatives.

Boy, has that changed, right? I mean, even in the last five years, the incredible spread of not technologies, but also the bandwidth for students to consume those technologies is just astronomically different. It's not even playing in the same space anymore, and we have so many more capacities, so many more rich ways of interacting and allowing students to interact with each other, with their instructor, with the content, that it's a night-and-day difference from when I started doing this.

Connie: In my experience, it is night and day from then, but still now, with learning management systems and your standard offering tools, it still feels pretty constrained. I'm wondering, are there tools that you or your students are using that you feel are cutting-edge?

Jason: Boy, that's a hard question to answer. I mean, I think the organizations I'm aware of that are doing cutting-edge stuff, they're custom coding in a lot of ways, right? It's custom development, which does, I think, allow them to, the reality matches their vision a little bit more. Articulate Storyline is still an important tool and we teach it to our students.

Connie: Yeah, that's what I use, too.

Jason: And Adobe is still an important tool and we teach it to our students, right, I mean, because despite their limitations, they are better than what was out there 10 years ago, 15 years ago.

Connie: True.

Jason: True, and they allow so many more people to participate in this business of learning.

Connie: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jason: Yeah. Well, and I mean, maybe just one more on this note, I mean, Flash offered so many capabilities, but it ended up being

such an albatross, too, right, and we just saw it completely shut off here within the last few months. A lot of great work is now just no longer usable at all.

Connie: That was a loss in many ways. What kinds of skills do you think that graduates are lacking when they get into the workplace? What do they come back and say to you, like, "Ah, I wish I would've known this," or do you see anything like that?

Jason: Yeah, we have that conversation a lot, and it seems that a lot of it has to do with the realities of working in an organization. With teams in particular, how do we even negotiate? How do I diplomatically advance my position without backing down, without ...? Our students will say, or our graduates will say, "I want to be true to the theories. I want to be true to the best practices, but I also know that I have to negotiate. I have to fit in. I can't just be a hardliner, or I get marginalized, and so how do I do that? How do I have these productive conversations where we give and take or where I have to be diplomatic, or I have to horse trade, some things I care less about to get what I really care about?" Those are things that are really important, and I don't know that instructional design programs are preparing students well enough to succeed in those aspects yet. There's a whole host of soft skills that go along with that of leadership and communication that's that we've got to get better at.

Connie: Right, right. Really great point. I have a podcast that some of your students might like. It was about working with subject matter experts. On it, I have a couple of people who are very experienced, and they just told them all of their tips, what they do, when they argue, when they fight, and when they give in, that kind of thing. You really do negotiate, and you usually can't walk into an organization with completely new ideas and think you're going to change things and it's tough.

Jason: Yeah, but it's so critical to be able to, and it's not unique to our business of learning, right? I mean, I think that's a reality that lots of new graduates face, but it's so critical to be able to say "I'm contributing to the mission of this organization, but I also offer something new that they don't have," right, and that balance, not just being the doormat and doing whatever is told to you, but at the same time, not insisting my way or the highway, that's an important skillset to develop.

Connie: Yeah, I'm really glad you mentioned that. Finally, I just want to ask, what kind of insight would you say you got from your collaboration?

Jason: The most important insight we got, Connie, was that, and it's actually in the article for readers who look at it, we developed a little model of how this conversation could take place among like-minded colleagues who think that they want to get better at sharing their knowledge with each other, so this model of how do we come together, how do we commit to a common purpose, how do we share the things that we individually have learned and experienced from our organizations, how do we understand what another person is saying or what they're teaching and how they are teaching it, and then trying that out and getting coaching along the way, because trying new things never goes perfect the first time. We've continued this collaboration for years now and we get a little bit better at it every year. We invite colleagues in to help us. We just did a round of creativity.

The things that we learn through that, I mean, that's for the three or four of us who participate, and we really want other people to have the same kind of experience with their colleagues. I'm not just talking about instructional design educators, right? I'm talking about a team lead from this organization and a team lead from another organization and a

supervisor in another organization. Can they get together and share the practical know-how that they've developed using a collaborative model like ours so that they can collectively raise all the boats. We feel really strongly me and my colleagues about helping us unlock this practical wisdom, practical information we have about how to be good mentors and coaches and instructional designers.

Connie: Yes. I mean, when I saw the model, I thought that it could apply to any workplace anywhere where people need to collaborate and learn from each other. It was very nice. Thank you for your time, Jason.

Jason: Thank you for the chance to have this conversation with you, Connie.

Connie: I hope you enjoyed that conversation. I'm feeling optimistic about the future of our field. It sounds like at least some programs are really thinking about the best ways to prepare graduates for the difficult and unique challenges that we face as practitioners. Their collaboration is a good example of how getting together and sharing practical know-how brings all of us to a higher level. Again, you can find a transcript and the show notes with links to resources at theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/67. Take care and I'll talk to you next time.