Article type

Commentary, double-blind peer review.

Publication history

Received: 26 January 2021. Revised: 25 March 2021.
Accepted: 27 March 2021. Published: 14 April 2021.

Cover image

Kaboompics
via Pexels.

Special issue Technology enhanced learning in the MENA region | **More at** <https://doi.org/10.21428/8c225f6e.1fd869f8>

Instructional design is the catalyst

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Keywords

professional development;
instructional design; 21st century
skills; remote teaching; commen-
tary

Citation

Johnson, P. (2021). Instructional
design is the catalyst. *Studies in
Technology Enhanced Learning*,
1(2), 317-322.

[https://doi.org/
10.21428/8c225f6e.779fcae5](https://doi.org/10.21428/8c225f6e.779fcae5)

Abstract

As educators have quickly adopted remote learning amid the Covid-19 pandemic, they have faced challenges of engagement, assessment, integrating 21st century skills, mastering new technology tools, and adapting face-to-face learning experiences for the online classroom, among others. Professional development in instructional design and the input of instructional designers could support educators in all of these areas.

English language teachers are now called upon to fundamentally change the learning experience for two reasons. First, to integrate 21st century skills (Trilling and Fadel, 2009) into curricula and assessments, and second, in response to the pandemic, to create online learning experiences.

For years, educators have discussed the importance of 21st century skills learning experiences, but few institutions have successfully done so. Part of the challenge is that creating a lesson that gives learners a chance to develop skills such as leadership, digital literacy, and global citizenship is a more complicated endeavour than the traditional English lesson. Furthermore, assessing the extent to which a person has developed an intangible skill such as creativity is a particular challenge.

Furthermore, there often isn't a straightforward translation from a face-to-face lesson or activity to an online one. There's no formula, no simple conversion method. This means a complete reconsideration of the learning experience, and that requires input, ideas, and inspiration.

This paper will examine how instructional design can be a catalyst for the development of more dynamic, engaging learning experiences that will better prepare students for academic and professional life.

1. Introduction

In my experience as a learning consultant to Middle East educators and education leaders, the most pressing questions they have asked, both during 2020 emergency remote teaching (ERT) and even before, focused on engagement, assessment, 21st century skills, and instructional technology.

In my daily work, I talk to education leaders and instructors (often one in the same) in the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, and other countries in the region. Conversations take place in meetings with individuals, program leaders, and groups of faculty from the same institution as well as large groups of faculty from multiple institutions. These conversations often center on resources, training for teachers on how to use course resources, and professional development to improve the standard of instruction.

Even before the pandemic struck, teachers and leaders have expressed concerns about assessment, engagement, and integration of 21st century skills into curricula. The pandemic highlighted the fact that a new set of skills and approaches are needed to overcome both longstanding and new challenges.

Instructional design skills can be the catalyst that helps educators overcome challenges in assessment, 21st century skills integration, engagement, and appropriate use of technology. So much so that, according to the 2020 Educator Horizon Report, instructional designers are taking a more central role in course design, shifting from a source of support to a critical part of the course and learning experience development process.

There are many definitions and opinions on what instructional design is and what instructional designers do, but for this paper, we will use "... the process by which learning products and experiences are designed, developed, and delivered. These learning products include online courses,

instructional manuals, video tutorials, learning simulations ..." (Instructional Design Central, 2021). Instructional designers create those products and experiences.

Institutions that have staffed, funded, supported teaching and learning centers can offer faculty and course developers the support of an instructional designer (or an instructional design team) in creating courses and programs and sessions that are appealing and engaging. The instructor-instructional designer collaboration can mean that synchronous and asynchronous learning modes are optimized for achievement of course learning outcomes. While both the instructional designer and faculty members can be experts on the learning outcomes for a course, the instructional designer understands how to design a course and has command of wide variety of instructional technology tools, and the faculty member is an expert on the course content. Together they can create assessments and rigorous learning experiences such as learning portfolios, creative projects such as videos or infographics, and community-involved activities.

Those are the experiences that support the development of 21st century skills (Trilling and Fadel, 2009), most notably communication, collaboration, creativity, and communication, leadership, and digital literacy. The Partnership for 21st Century Learning, also called P21 (P21 Framework Definitions, 2015), describes them as "the skills, knowledge and expertise students must master to succeed in work and life; it is a blend of content knowledge, specific skills, expertise and literacies."

2. Assessment

Before the pandemic, administrators noted that their teaching teams were not as well versed as they would like in assessment design. Sometimes teachers worried that they were being asked, or even required, to do something extremely important for which they did not have training or skills. During the pandemic, the previous challenges remained constant with the added concern of academic integrity in online exams.

Many would agree that it is time-consuming to create an original traditional test with fixed correct answers. Additionally, traditional, objective multiple-choice or short-answer language tests do not provide data on whether, or to what extent, students are developing the skills of productivity, leadership, creativity, digital literacy, and other 21st century skills. For this reason, and perhaps many others, it is necessary to rethink assessment. If educators want to know whether students can describe an event in the past,

it might be helpful to ask them to choose the past tense form of a verb when given four options in a multiple choice question. However, this might only tell us if the student can recognize the past tense. Alternatively, instructors could ask a student to recount a past experience of their own, and the response could be marked according to a rubric that is based on course learning outcomes. This would better inform a teacher about whether a student is able to produce target language. Instructional design expertise can support the process of creating the prompt, setting up a process of submitting the work, grading the work, and using the technology needed to carry out those steps.

3. Engagement

In 2019 and earlier, a few administrators said the biggest engagement challenge they observed was simply teachers delivering boring classes, and teachers lamented that students were only interested in looking at their phones. Once the pandemic forced a switch to remote learning, many teachers from around the Middle East expressed concern that students were logging on for class but turning cameras and mics off and walking away.

Project-based learning techniques help teachers engage students with a variety of activities but also create activities that provide data on student participation. For example, assessment-for-learning and game-based-learning activities can keep students engaged and provide the educators with data on whether the learner is actively working during a synchronous online session.

Additionally, the widespread 2020 shift to ERL often meant that two hours of face-to-face classroom instruction meant two hours of online instruction, with students expected to spend several hours per day at a computer screen. This compliance-driven approach does not allow educators to optimize asynchronous assignments and activities, such as discussion threads and creative projects, to ease the pressure of many consecutive hours of screen time.

4. 21st Century Skills

Discussion of 21st century skills and what they are has been widespread in recent decades. However, schools and universities find it difficult to integrate them into their curricula (Vista, Kim, & Care, 2018).

The intangible, abstract nature of 21st century skills makes them more challenging to assess (Vista et al., 2018),

and therefore, many institutions are reluctant to build them into the curriculum.

Furthermore, the necessity for significant change to the daily learning experience can also make 21st century skills more challenging to transform from idea to reality. For institutions that have taught and assessed the same way for many years, being told that they have to include projects and interactive experiences in a curriculum based largely on exams can come as a shock.

Educators who themselves are idea-fluent problem solvers with a command of instructional technology and design can navigate these changes, and many often advocate for them. However, many teachers do not have those skills, or do not have them to the required extent to effect change. However, if we look to professional development as a possible remedy, we find that many institutions tend to offer individual, unconnected sessions that are not in response to stakeholder needs, but simply what is available, meaning that many current approaches to professional development do not meet the need for instructional design skills.

5. Instructional design

The pandemic shift to ERL has highlighted the need for a new approach to engagement, assessment, and 21st century skills. That approach includes projects and assignments that turn away from, but do not entirely forsake, traditional gap fill and multiple-choice questions and toward work that requires students to formulate original responses, often in multiple stages. Such assessments will require learning experiences in line with this approach to assessment. However, to make these new approaches realities, teachers themselves will have to apply the 21st century skills of creativity, idea fluency, collaboration, and digital literacy. Institutions can support this evolution by creating or expanding instructional design support, either through teaching and learning centers, or embedding instructional designers within programs or discipline areas, or through a well-considered program of professional development in instructional design.

Instructional design professionals can help educators maximize the advantages of different modes of course delivery. For example, some educators saw successes with online teaching during the pandemic with students who felt more comfortable typing into a chat than speaking in front of a group in a face-to-face classroom. Other learners might feel more comfortable in small breakout room conversations (Mehta, 2020). Furthermore, online experiences can offer more opportunities for learners of different levels to work at

their own pace, and teachers might also be able to personalize the experience for the learner (Graham, 2015). These advantages of online instruction can be built into a course, and their advantages optimized.

Although it is beneficial when institutions can support educators with instructional designers and teaching and learning centers, educators themselves need instructional design skills to build and execute evolving approaches to assessment and the daily learning experience.

6. Professional development

To do this, institutions can accept responsibility for cultivating the teachers they need. For many institutions, the pandemic has shown that traditional approaches to professional development left many teachers and institutions unprepared or underprepared to deliver courses online. Furthermore, even once the initial emergency shift to remote learning was over and a new term began in the fall, despite some time for adjustment and preparation, many institutions continued delivering courses built for a face-to-face teaching environment online, without taking advantage of the benefits of technology and asynchronous learning activities.

A teaching team informed about available technology, and able to exploit the advantages of synchronous, asynchronous, and face-to-face experiences, would be able to support the transition from traditional face-to-face courses delivered online to flexible courses designed to meet challenges of the pandemic, and recover from it.

However, one of the most challenging obstacles to a continuous professional development solution that can build that agile teaching team is a focus on compliance over needs, choice, and even professional learning itself (The Boston Consulting Group, 2015). I have encountered leaders who appear to view professional development as an administrative task and who request two, four, or six hours of workshops without considering their teaching teams' professional development needs or interests. The idea that offering a number of hours of workshops is a simply task to be completed has become an obstacle to meaningful, relevant professional development, perhaps leaving teachers with the idea that professional development itself is not a useful endeavor (The Boston Consulting Group, 2015).

While technology has increased teachers' need for PD, it also increases their access to it, and the variety educators can choose from. Workshops are a great way for teachers to access new ideas and exchange ideas. However, if

institutions recognized courses from online professional development platforms, peer observations, massive open online courses (MOOCs), communities of practice, and other less-conventional forms of professional development, the access to a wider variety of topics would mean a greater opportunity to access the most relevant PD for teachers' needs.

Transforming professional development from an ad-hoc task to a relevant, varied, and enjoyable path to ensuring quality learning experiences is central to success in current pandemic conditions and in the future.

7. Conclusion

A thorough PD needs analysis and sound professional development program that includes instructional design skills can empower leaders to create the teaching team they, and their students, need to create learning experiences that work face-to-face, remotely, or as a hybrid of the two. Empowered, informed teachers are the most effective means to ensuring a continuously improving standard of instruction that can weather the challenges of today and tomorrow.

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About the author

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