

Reflections of a new educational designer

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Educational design is an area of growing significance in tertiary education, though the career pathway to educational design is varied. Few specific qualifications are available, and so educational designers tend to take up their roles with little experience or in-depth knowledge. The purpose of the study is to investigate one new educational designer's development from new to experienced practitioner, in order to identify what new educational designers might expect as they develop. Across the early stage of her educational design role, Nicky Meuleman, educational designer at Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, captured significant encounters and recorded ongoing reflection. This paper summarises and discusses the key themes from those reflections, providing insight into one educational designer's journey from beginner to proficient practitioner.

Keywords: Educational design, development, reflection, practitioner.

Educational design at the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand

Higher education is providing more and more opportunities for educational designers (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2016) however training opportunities are very fragmented. Though educational design is clearly an area of professional expertise, no established career pathway is in place. Up to 20% of educational designers have no specific training for the role (MacLean & Scott, 2007); in Australasia, some 50% have up to an unspecified bachelor's degree as their highest qualification (ibid.). Many educational designers are drawn to their craft without really knowing what to expect, and with little direct experience.

It is not uncommon for new educational designers to not have any qualification specific to the craft; teachers and those with teaching experience are typically attractive choices for employers. Given the trend toward more potentially capable yet inexperienced appointments into educational designer roles, and a desire to help orientate such educational designers, the authors agreed to collaborate on a project to explore what a new educational designer might expect and how they might best develop toward proficiency.

This poster session will trace Nicky's development drawing on her account of experiences on the job, and regular reflection points. The poster will provide highlights of her reflections and provide advice for those beginning careers as educational designers.

Method

The methodology of this study is that of case study and grounded theory, with a population of one. Nicky is the subject and sole source of data. The project relies on a semi-structured series of journal entries.

Following an initial written piece describing her context as an educational designer, Nicky undertook to prepare a series of experience accounts (reflections based on experiences she considered meaningful to her role and development) and fortnightly summaries of her development. Fortnightly summaries used the headings "What I did well", "What I learned", "What I need to be able to do better", and "What I need to know more about". All reflections were up to 500 words in length. In all, Nicky prepared thirty-seven reflections.

Findings and recommendations

Over time, the reflections broadly developed as follows:

1. Initial excitement and bewilderment, helpfulness and eagerness; a new job, in an exciting area!
2. Frustration at a lack of knowledge alongside developing confidence and independence in the role.
3. Increased awareness of the collegial and institutional context, with an increasing awareness of the political and organisational culture.
4. Rationalisation as to how much she could contribute (following a time of real pressure); setting personal boundaries for work hours, while still mindful of responsibilities.
5. Recognition as a technical expert and contributor to new initiatives; the result of prior knowledge, and a willingness to get involved constructively.
6. Satisfaction as to the results of her work and development as an ED; seeing the results of her work, and maintaining a student focus alongside an increasing awareness of the constraints of the role.
7. Disillusionment and questioning about the role as a career; experiencing the repetitiveness of much of the work, understanding the constraints of institutional tools and project focus, the call of other options.

Subsequent correspondence reveals that other opportunities within the role opened up following the end of the reflections period.

The poster will highlight the following advice for those new to the educational designer role:

1. **Relax, because the context will come.** That you were appointed shows you have potential. Expect to be bewildered and feel out of your depth from time to time. Eventually you build knowledge of the task, and the inter-relationships and workings of the organization you've joined will gradually make sense.
2. **Trust – and challenge – your instincts.** Often your gut sense about design is a good guide, but be open to your instincts being further shaped and improved by others. You will often need to apply your own judgement, because not everything will be clear. Learn when to take your own initiative, and when to ask for guidance.
3. **Expect to change.** Even your standards will change over time; these will not necessarily get worse, but they will be tempered by productivity, available technical solutions, institutional style, and the good practice you encounter in the work of others. You will eventually understand that productivity is not the antithesis of good design, too.
4. **Be realistic about your workplace.** Temper your expectations. Not everything will be perfectly outlined or systematized. As much as you can, adopt an appreciative and constructive approach to such situations. Expect a political environment, and be deliberate about your response to it. Adopt a flexible approach to situations; even with good management deadlines will change, stakeholders will change, and the courses assigned to you will change from time to time.
5. **Learn the rhythm of the role.** There will be peak times when you will likely get frazzled, frustrated, and fed-up; there will also be times when you can celebrate achievements. From time to time things will slow down, too, giving you an opportunity to further develop.
6. **Foster good relationships with all.** Educational designers always work in a team context. Rely on and support your colleagues, and other project members.
7. **Be deliberate about self-development.** Learn, learn, learn. Master the tools of the trade, both technical and pedagogical. These enhance both your practice and potential. Expose yourself to new experiences as much as possible. These will provide ample means of learning, while boosting your confidence and independence. Develop an instinctive mastery of soft skills.
8. **Consider keeping a reflective diary** as a valid and useful form of professional development:
 - a. What did I do well this last fortnight? What am I proud of?
 - b. What did I learn this last fortnight? What was new to me?
 - c. What do I need to know more about? How can I further extend myself?

References

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