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How to Develop Yourself as a Learning Professional

How to Develop Yourself as a Learning Professional

January 30, 2017 | By Joel Gardner
Instructional Design
Educational Technology

The world is constantly changing and, as a learning professional, your role is constantly evolving. To remain relevant and have a positive impact in your profession, you must continually acquire and expand your knowledge and skills to improve yourself in your craft.

In this blog post, I will share some of my ideas regarding setting professional development goals, defining possible areas of development, and improving your general and specialized knowledge.

Four Strategies for Setting Professional Development Goals

1. **Be clear about how you will impact people's lives.** If you have this clarity, then your next step often becomes more clear. I have articulated my professional purpose in this manner: "My professional purpose and mission is to discover and share knowledge that inspires, empowers, and equips others to succeed in their careers and lives." *Be totally clear about how would you like to impact and improve others' lives.*
2. **Envision your future self.** What kind of a person do you want to be? What do you want to become? Look at examples of people you want to be like and identify the traits, skills, and expertise you would like to develop. Who do you want to become in a year? In three years? *Create a compelling vision of yourself and work to make it a reality.*
3. **Set career goals.** Your career is going to happen, so you might as well be deliberate about what you want to happen within your career. What position will help you impact others' lives in the way you envision? What is the next position that would move you toward becoming your best self? What is the dream job you want to work toward? *Align your career with how you want to impact people's lives.*
4. **Create clear actions for reaching your goals.** Be specific about the steps you will take - the skills you will develop, the people you will meet, and the knowledge you will gain. It's sometimes helpful to create a timeline for what you would like to happen, realizing that timelines and paths are fluid and ever-changing. *Identify the most important step you must take and focus on that step.*

Four Areas of Personal Development in Instructional Design

There are 4 basic areas of professional development within the field of instructional design:

1. **Process**

This category includes developing knowledge and skills regarding project management and workflow. The result of skills developed in this category is increased efficiency, quality control, and empowerment of designers. What knowledge or skills would increase your efficiency or effectiveness in your design processes?

2. **Technology**

This category includes developing knowledge and skills regarding technologies that deliver or enhance the learning experience, track design processes, evaluate learning, and manage the overall learning experience. What are your technological gaps as an instructional designer?

3. **Theory**

This category includes researching and understanding theory on how people learn (learning theory) and how to help them learn (instructional theory). There are many theories and models for learning that are pretty innovative, and improving and refining your understanding of how to help people learn is quite important. In addition, younger generations experience information and knowledge differently than perhaps older generations do, and understanding their experiences and expectations will also inform how you design. How might you deepen or refine your theoretical knowledge?

4. **Self**

You are the instrument through which all design takes place. You must make yourself the most effective “technology” possible. How could you improve and optimize your attitudes, beliefs and habits? How could you improve your health and mental sharpness? What could you do right now to make yourself a more balanced, well-rounded individual?

General vs. Specialized Development

I have a high level of specialized knowledge in learning and instruction, which is due to nearly 20 years of teaching and design experience, two advanced degrees, and years of teaching instructional design. However, I have realized that I use a great deal of *general* knowledge and skills to make my work meaningful and useful. These general skills are not necessarily design-specific and might include communication, critical thinking, problem solving, and project management skills, among many others. Design skills are essential, but so are the general skills.

I close with a challenge. Think about the following two questions and apply them to your own professional development:

- What design-specific knowledge and skills (e.g. technologies, processes, theory, etc.) do you personally need to develop to make yourself more effective as an instructional designer?
- What general knowledge and skills (e.g. communication skills, critical thinking, project management, political savvy, etc.) do you personally need to develop to make yourself a more effective professional?

As you continually expand your abilities as a learning professional, you will stay current in the field and have greater capacity to impact the learners you work with. Ultimately, you will impact others’ lives in the way you envision. What can you do now to move forward?

About the Author

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Dr. Gardner is currently an instructional designer and department chair for the International Institute for Innovative Instruction at Franklin University.