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A Non-Traditional Journey to Instructional Design: An Interview with Roberta Niche

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Instructional Design

Renowned psychologist Abraham Maslow had this to say about humans:

“A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be.”

Maslow then followed up with this haunting quote:

“If you plan on being anything less than you are capable of being, you will probably be unhappy all the days of your life.”

In light of Maslow’s work on self-actualization and our quest to find the meaning of work in our lives, I decided to interview a colleague who has taken a non-traditional route to Instructional Design, as this seems to be a discipline that professionals encounter on a whim—even “falling” into the field quite by accident. This interview focuses on unpredictable results from what could be considered a predictable path.

Roberta Niche is someone who has peace with herself—living what she must be, happy all the days of her life. Her 25 years of experience in K-12 classroom teaching and staff development has led her to an instructional design faculty position with the International Institute for Innovative Instruction. Prior to her career as an educator, Roberta was an officer in the United States Navy, where her assignments included directing training for a 400-person aviation squadron. Roberta earned a bachelor’s degree in journalism from Syracuse and a master’s in educational technology from California State University.

Niccole: Roberta, can you tell us a bit about your military experience? How do you think it helped to shape your foundation in educating others?

Roberta: I was a lieutenant in VA-122, a Navy squadron that taught pilots to fly the A-7E Corsair II. We also taught mechanics how to fix them. I was one of the first women to go out on an aircraft carrier and work in the maintenance department. One of my jobs was squadron training officer. The sailors pretty much hated training; they thought it was boring! I set out to change that. We did “The Safety Maze,” a game where teams of sailors moved from station to station around the hangar, learning and competing. We developed “Eagle Jeopardy,” another learning game with a competitive element. They really loved this stuff, and that solidified my opinion that if you’re going to train them, you’ve gotta entertain them too! I was really lucky to learn from senior enlisted personnel who’d been through Navy instructor school. I learned a lot about writing learning outcomes and the elements of an effective lesson.

N: That was a great experience for such a young, budding professional! I’m especially impressed by your ability to see how you can learn from others. How did your career then evolve in the K-12 environment?

R: When I left the Navy, I walked right into a 7th grade classroom with no training. California's teaching internship program allowed me to teach while working on my credentials two nights a week at a local college. I was pregnant, a first-year teacher, going to college at night, and doing naval reserve drills on the weekends. I also had the most challenging class! I didn't know that when I walked in, but as everybody later informed me, that's what they'd been since kindergarten. I can see their faces and list all 34 names, even to this day. They were a funny, creative, angry, undisciplined, curious, push-your-buttons bunch. They drove me mad, and I loved them. Mainly, I learned that teaching begins with building relationships and trust.

The principal at our school was committed to staff development, so I went to a ton of workshops and conferences. One of them was about an interesting new piece of software called [HyperStudio](#). Here was a reason to get excited about that balky, problematic machine in the back corner of the room! Soon, the kids and I were crazy for multimedia, and I began to get a dim vision of how computers tied into my beliefs about learning needing to be fun, engaging, and hands-on. I wrote a five-year technology plan to put five computers and other technology in every classroom. I presented a vision of what students could do. The school board like the idea so much they voted to do it all in one year. I had an ideal classroom with which to develop and test my ideas about technology integration.

As my family moved around where my husband's work took us, I worked as a district technology integrator, a staff development specialist, a technology grant administrator, and finally, as a library media specialist. The LMS job was an ideal job for me; I worked with students on cool projects and helped them connect with books they loved. I mentored teachers and helped them plan. I lived with the books and the technology. What could be finer?

N: What an evolution! Your journey to Instructional Design is considered non-traditional. How did you get into the field?

R: Ha-ha! You know the answer to this one since you were the one willing to take a chance on me! We moved to Ohio in 2012 and I thought I'd retire. K-12 education is very different these days, and I thought that I wanted a break. I was wrong! Staying home was boring, so I started looking around for interesting work. I didn't even know that "Instructional Designer" was a career. Franklin University immediately caught my eye. Their global outlook and the commitment to create an institute dedicated to best practices was so appealing. The opportunity to participate in a huge project like our design work for Saudi Electronic University was very exciting.

N: You've certainly jumped into Instructional Design with both feet! Now let's focus on the present day. How do technological tools play a role in your Instructional Design efforts?

R: At Franklin, we're always looking to do things faster/smarter/better, so technology tools are huge. Tools streamline our processes; we're big users of SharePoint for managing documents. OneNote is our design team's "brain." We use it collaboratively to share information so that if one person knows something, we all know about it. No information stovepipes! We use so many technology tools in our designs. [EdPuzzle](#) is a way to make videos more engaging and hold students accountable for watching them. I wish I'd had [Socrative](#) back in my Navy days. It's an excellent tool for gamifying assessment. [TodaysMeet](#) and [Chatzy](#) are awesome for backchannel chat during presentations. I could go on and on. Right now, we're investigating [Perusall](#), a collaborative annotation tool. It's my favorite kind of tool, one that helps students work together to deepen their understanding.

N: Finally, Roberta, now that you've accomplished so much in your career, what would you tell your less-experienced Instructional Design self?

R: Probably that sometimes, less is more! It is possible to overwrite a design and try to pack so much into it that students (and instructors) are overwhelmed. While it's important to be detailed and provide sufficient scaffolding for assignments, it's equally important to be clear, concise, and mindful of students' cognitive load. My teammate Jesse [blogged about this](#) recently. Speaking of teammates, I'd sure tell my younger design self to appreciate being surrounded by smart and generous people!

About the Author

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Niccole Hyatt leads a team of professionals to develop instructional design and learning interventions for academic institutions, governmental entities, and corporations (domestic and international)