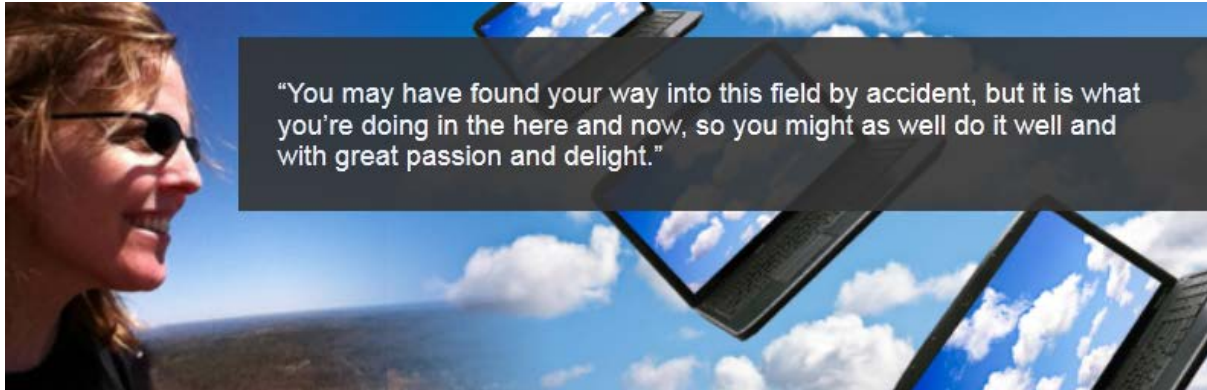


The Accidental Instructional Designer (Jan 12)

By Cammy Bean

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When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up? A doctor? A teacher? A firefighter? An eLearning instructional designer (ID) doing corporate training? Hmm... Yeah, probably not that last one.

As a teenager and young adult, I set my sights on becoming a writer or a teacher. I was an English major with thoughts of becoming a professor or a high school English teacher. Lucky me, as an eLearning instructional designer, that's pretty much what I get to do. But I stumbled into this field, as did most of us who do this work.

Let's get personal

How did I get here? Well, I demonstrated aptitude. I worked as part of an internal team, designing a call center application back in the early days of GUI interfaces. (I don't think we were even using e-mail yet!) Because I'd helped design the system, I knew it inside and out and could explain it really well to all of the call center reps. Voila! A classroom trainer was born. And because I could string sentences together in a coherent way – and because I thought it was pretty much fun – I started writing a weekly how-to newsletter. Performance support and job aids, lovingly printed out and stuffed into over a hundred company mailboxes.

From there I went to a "multimedia production" company that hired me as an instructional designer. We created training programs delivered on CD ROM. I had never heard of an instructional designer, but it all sounded so glamorous: video production, and computers and graphics. So there I was – an instructional designer, almost by accident. And 16-years later, here I still am.

What about you?

So what's your story? Did you have a similar path on the way to becoming an ID involving accident and intrigue? Did you set off down your career path with your sights set on something quite different than what you've turned into – at least for the moment? When I have this conversation with groups of instructional designers, there's usually a lot of affirming head nods.

As eLearning continues to grow and expand as an industry, we see more and more people finding their way into the field by accident. We tap Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) for their expertise and institutional knowledge to create training. But with no formal training in instructional design, and nothing to go on but instinct and experience ("Yeah, I went to school so I know how people should be taught"), SMEs often just pick up some PowerPoint templates and do their best. They might mimic other eLearning courses, which, sadly, are more often than not your standard-variety-click-to-learn text-heavy extravaganzas that give a lot of eLearning a bad name.

Kicking it up a notch

So what can you do – for yourself and for your internal teams – to start creating better eLearning that actually achieves real performance change? How can you stop going by the “dump and pray method” of design (this is what my grandmother used to call her approach to cooking), and instead create learning designs that are effective and that – gasp! – actually help people do their jobs better?

You can do lots of things, but let's start at the beginning.

What's the fire in your belly?

First and foremost: Get your passion on.

I decided long ago that if this was indeed going to be my career, then I might as well do it with as much passion and gusto as I could bring to it. That if I was going to spend my days writing scripts and QAing eLearning programs, that I should do it well – and create programs that people might actually learn from and enjoy.

Make connections

Here are some of the ways I've got my passion on over the past few years, and I offer them up as suggestions to you:

Connect with other eLearning professionals. Blogs and Twitter feeds provide lots of amazing resources and contact with individuals struggling with some of the same challenges as you. Tony Karrer's eLearning Learning blog feed aggregator (<http://www.eLearninglearning.com/>) is a great place to start to find blogs that interest you. Jane Hart's compilation of edu-tweeters (<http://c4lpt.co.uk/social-learning-handbook/workplace-learning-professionals-who-blog-andor-tweet/>) lists tweeters in the learning and development space. [*Editor's Note:* The eLearning Guild has an excellent and active Group on LinkedIn, too (<http://www.linkedin.com/groups?gid=102144>).]

Read books. Lots of 'em – about instructional design and learning. Embrace your inner learning nerd and put books like Ruth Clark and Richard Mayer's classic *eLearning and the Science of Instruction* on your bedside table, or pick up Julie Dirksen's new contribution to the scene, *Design for How People Learn*.

Sign up for free online Webinars on eLearning design and other related topics. The eLearning Guild offers online forums and Webinars every month, but also check out regular offerings from ASTD and Training Magazine Network. Presenters share content on a wide variety of topics including the latest research about learning, demos of projects, ideas about new technologies and more. I like to try and hit one or two Webinars a month, if I'm lucky.

Go to conferences. If your budget can afford it, get some face-time with other learning professionals. The eLearning Guild's Learning Solutions conference coming up this March in Orlando or the DevLearn conference in November are two of the best conferences for your money. ASTD and Training are two other biggies. If you don't have the budget to attend in person, you can still dip into the learning stream by watching the conference backchannel on Twitter and blogs. <http://www.learningsolutionsmag.com/articles/705/lessons-learned-from-the-mlearncon-2011-backchannel>

A degree might be the key

Consider a degree or certificate program in instructional design or educational technology. This isn't a requirement to career success, but may give you the kick-start and the inspiration you need if you're just getting started, or want to gain deeper expertise.

In an ongoing survey on my blog <http://cammybean.kineo.com/2007/11/instructional-designers-do-you-have.html>, I've been asking practicing IDs whether they have an advanced degree in the field. With 504 responses to date, 63% of IDs say that they do NOT have an advanced degree; while only 16% of those without degrees say they that someone denied them work as an IDer because they didn't have one. I say it's not a requirement (and have gotten into many a heated argument about this with other IDs), but it can't hurt, and it may certainly open up doors for you – or at least help you learn more about your passion.

If you do want to go down this route, be sure to research various programs, as they're not all equal.

Also check out Patti Shank's Guild Report on eLearning Degrees and Credentials: Needs of the eLearning Professional. The Guild's research results paint a slightly different picture than the results of my blog's more informal survey, so it's good to check out both. <http://www.eLearningguild.com/research/archives/index.cfm?id=151&action=viewonly>

Full disclosure about me – I don't have an advanced degree in ID, and while sometimes I think it would be nice to have some fancy letters after my name to give me a bit more credibility, I don't think spending the time on an ID degree would be worth my time at this point. Not that I don't have something to learn about ID – of course I do – but I'd rather focus on something more specific like cognitive science.

Share with your team

Share what you learn with your teammates. If you're responsible for managing Subject Matter Experts who now design training programs within your organization, help them get better at what they do, too. Help them learn to actually be instructional designers, so that you can proactively prevent a few train(ing) wrecks.

Even those of you who serve as one-stop-super-shops and who provide all of an organization's eLearning needs can share what you're learning with others in the company. There's a future coming when training no longer lives within a single department but must rather go viral throughout the organization (some would say it's an already-existing present). That is, EVERYONE needs to become an instructional designer in order to keep the enterprise vital and relevant. As a passionate IDer, you can help lead that change.

Go out and feed your passion!

You may have found your way into this field by accident, but it is what you're doing in the here and now, so you might as well do it well and with great passion and delight. Your life will be more fulfilling that way. And hopefully you'll be making eLearning a better experience for those who need to learn from it.

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