# Personal Reflections as I Complete my Instructional Design Graduate Studies

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In a way, I find it surreal that I'm about to graduate with a degree from the OU college of education. I grew up surrounded by teachers, but education was never a career that I considered a fit for myself. Helping students seemed to come naturally to my mother and grandmother. They had worked together to build one of the most respected adult basic education programs in the state of Nebraska. I visited their classroom frequently, absorbed the surroundings, and sometimes worked one-on-one with students to help them with reading and math. I was even a regular attendee on the adult education conference circuit. The diverse faces and needs of adult learners marked my childhood. Still, my interests lied elsewhere.

I was a die-hard sports fan. If I wasn't playing basketball, I was watching it on TV, reading about it in magazines, or organizing my basketball card collection. My dream was to make it to the NBA as a media relations director. When it came time for me to go to college, I decided on the University of Oklahoma where I studied journalism and math and got my foot in the door with the university's Athletics Media Relations department. My first year in media relations was great. I gained the trust of the managers and was offered the top student position for the next year. In my second year, circumstances quickly became challenging. I was failing one of my math classes, family members were in declining health back home, my car broke down, and I was running out of rent money. My work suffered, and I was quickly fired without having a chance to explain myself.

Forced to regroup, I finished my degree unceremoniously during January intersession, moved back home, and spent the next year-and-a-half working on my family's farm while looking for a job. Without a recommendation from my former managers at OU, my media relations prospects were limited. I had a few offers for small-town newspaper reporter jobs, but my heart wasn't in that. Eventually, I happened into a technical writing job and fell in love. It was the perfect outlet to integrate the logic and critical thinking skills that I had developed in math classes with the writing and interviewing skills from my journalism background.

## Epic

I began my professional career working for Epic, an innovative healthcare software company with an intense customer focus. My early days were spent writing release notes and administrator's guides, but my role soon expanded. As Epic employees, we were given significant latitude to choose projects of interest to work on. After realizing that many of our customer physicians were dissatisfied with our software, a small group of us went to work on finding ways to address that problem. We built relationships with SMEs across the company, including physicians on our staff who understood the workflows and pain points of our customer physicians. After taking some time to analyze the problems, we settled on a combination of solutions, a mix of training and public relations interventions. It was during this experience that I first began to think about learning theory and instructional design principles--though I likely wouldn't have used those terms at the time--wondering if the rationale behind our solutions and designs was sound. I also got my first experience using Adobe Captivate to produce some software demos. That took me back to my days of editing TV news packages in college and was a skill I wanted to develop further.

I sometimes joke that the experience I gained working at Epic was equivalent to a Ph. D. In my seven years there, I worked on a broad range of projects, learned from many brilliant co-workers, and gained much valuable experience. Epic's unique corporate philosophy, strong hiring and onboarding processes, and innovations as a learning organization helped to mold my own philosophies of and interest in corporate learning and employee development.

After getting a taste of hands-on instructional design experience at Epic, I had a growing desire to connect that experience back with theoretical rationale. However, at the time, going back to school wasn't an option I would have considered. My work was demanding, and I had time for little else. A few years later, after I had relocated to join my boyfriend in New Jersey, I decided that the time was right to begin a master's program.

## Stockton

Going into my educational technology program at Stockton (Stockton College at the time I enrolled, but Stockton University during the latter part of my time there) I was excited to be back on campus and ready to learn. It had been eight years since I had finished my undergraduate degree, and my work experience had provided me with some specific learning goals and questions to answer.

My first semester, I took an Adult Learning course, which allowed me to make connections between ideas from theorists like Malcolm Knowles and the work I had been doing back at Epic. I enjoyed many of my courses at Stockton and the immersive, hands-on experience that they offered. I had an advisor who was a great mentor and excelled at modeling a constructivist learning environment. I took three of her courses and also had the opportunity to work under her as a graduate teaching assistant, providing technical assistance to other students in the program. This GA experience was enjoyable but also challenging because I was working full-time, commuting, juggling two demanding courses, and feeling like I just didn't have enough time in the week to get everything done.

A few semesters in, I was frustrated with myself and frustrated with the program. Several of the courses that I had been excited to take when I enrolled were no longer being offered, there was an effort underway to move the program from a hybrid format to completely online, and I was struggling with the fact that the program was not research-oriented, which I began to see as a significant deficiency. While I felt that the Stockton program had been a great place to start my graduate education, I wanted to leave with a degree that I was proud of, and I didn't feel that was going to be the case. I was proud of my OU journalism degree--I had worked extremely hard for it. Ultimately, I didn't want that to be overshadowed by a master's degree that I didn't value as much. I chose to leave the program after completing 18 credits.

Two years later, I found myself at a crossroads. I was unfulfilled with my job and longing to take a step forward in my career. After enduring a string of personal losses, the time was right to do something for myself. I inquired about the instructional design program at OU and enrolled soon afterward.

## OU

Returning to OU as a graduate student has been a great experience. What I've learned has built on the foundations laid during my time at Epic and Stockton. The breadth of the instructional psychology and instructional design and technology curriculum is wide. I've studied research, learning theory, instructional design theory, educational psychology, measurement, project management, model building, visual literacy, and much more. With the opportunity to grow skills in so many areas, it can be overwhelming to try to become proficient in all areas while trying to choose one or two areas in which to focus and build expertise. That's something I am still struggling with, yet the exercise of developing my online portfolio has revealed that some of the seemingly diverse areas in which I've delved over these last few years have seemed to converge in a way that I feel will ultimately help me to take the next step in my career.

One of the significant areas of growth that I experienced in my time in the OU program was in developing and defining my areas of research interest as well as building formal research skills. Taking Dr. Bradshaw's introduction to research course gave me an excellent introduction to types of research, research methods, and how to read and evaluate a research article. Dr. Crowson's quantitative statistics courses also gave me a number of skills to make me a better research consumer. One regret that I have is that I did not get an opportunity to conduct or participate in a research study myself.

Dr. Heddy's Motivation and Learning course has proven to be foundational to my subsequent coursework and much of my professional work as well. Understanding the work of theorists such as Ryan and Deci, Dweck, Csikszentmihalyi has so many practical applications in instructional design and in life in general. This course also gave me an opportunity to experience educational technology first-hand from the perspective of a learner. I took the course remotely while I was still living in New Jersey and would call in to the weekly class via Skype. Dr. Heddy had his iPad set up on a Kubi stand so that I could see the board and interact with others who were there in-person. Overall, it was a great experience that demonstrated the power of technology and provided me a great introduction to the EIPT program.

One of my goals for my time in graduate school has been to pursue additional learning opportunities beyond my program of study. I've taken two education courses outside the EIPT program that I found incredibly valuable. The first, Memoir and Life Writing from the Adult Education program, provided an incredible example of how amazing an online course can be. The supportive learning community that our professor led us to build made it a safe place to challenge ourselves and share our unique experiences and perspectives. The second, Secondary English Curriculum from the ILAC program, also provided a strong learning community and gave me my first experience with preparing academic writing for publication as our class collaborated to write a history of English language arts education in the late 20th and early 21st century. Beyond pure academic subjects, I've also pursued some outside learning opportunities, including golf lessons, Lean/'Six Sigma certification training, and a book binding course. In all of these experiences, I've found myself studying and comparing the design of the various courses and the ways in which the instructors led and facilitated the learning. It's been fascinating to see some diverse examples and take notes about things I see working well and not so well and giving me new ideas to bring back to my own instructional design work.

During my time in Norman, I have been fortunate to have an outlet where I could apply and build on the skills I was learning in my EIPT coursework. In my role as a graduate assistant writer and editor at the K20 Center I have gained practical experience with research and instructional design. My daily role has me reviewing and editing K-12 constructivist lessons as well as professional development sessions for Oklahoma teachers. I have written several literature reviews and research briefs to form the basis for instructional design projects. I also had the opportunity to spend last summer writing grants for three USDE GEAR UP projects, which ultimately were successful in securing $68M for the center over the next seven years. Playing a significant role in bringing learning and college preparation resources to 46 schools across Oklahoma and 80 new jobs to the Norman community is one of the most significant accomplishments of my time in the program. I feel like my work at K20 would make my mother and grandmother proud.

I have also worked on practicum and internship projects that have challenged me to become a better instructional and graphic designer and introduced me to a community of practitioners. In my practicum project, I was able to interview several graduates of the program and learn about what they're doing now. Hearing their stories was fascinating and inspiring. In my internship project at a local software company, I have been working with a full-time instructional designer who has engaged me in many excellent conversations about the ID field. With her background being in higher education and mine in software, we have been able to collaborate on solutions for a number of instructional problems that incorporate both perspectives. Through these projects, I've also had the opportunity to grow my proficiency with the Adobe Creative Suite and Captivate, which should prove helpful in securing a job after graduation.

## ID Projects

My first project, *Closing the Gap*, was completed during my time at Stockton University. The assignment required us to curate resources for an online learning experience based on Gagne's nine events of instruction. My choice of topic was inspired by my small work team at Caesars Entertainment, which was spread across the country and interacted almost exclusively online. The intent was to help such teams bond and work together more effectively. I am most proud of the look of the project--my goal was to make it polished and cohesive. My advisor was impressed with my work and presented my project as an example at a conference. If I could make changes to the project based on what I've learned in my most recent courses, I would scaffold the project more and allow for more learner choice. The structure is a bit prescriptive and linear and there isn't enough context for learners to fully understand what they're doing and why they're doing it.

My second project, *A Logic Lesson*, was completed for my text-based instruction course at OU. The assignment required us to create an instructional module that included illustrations and was developed using Adobe In Design. I chose to create a module that introduced basic logic concepts to technical writers at Epic. I like that the content is simple and clean and that it allows for individual reflection on projects close to and meaningful to the learner. I also appreciated the opportunity I had to receive formative feedback from Dr. Bradshaw and the other two students taking this course, which helped me to make some adjustments that improved the quality of the course and the way I was assessing the learners. If I could do this project over, I would do a more thorough analysis of the topic and the learners to gain more precise insight into what the learners' knowledge gaps are and how and where they encounter logic in their daily work in order to tailor the instruction to more specific objectives.

My third project, *K20 Creative Cohort*, was the final project for my instructional design theories, models, and strategies course at OU. The assignment required us to design a constructivist learning environment using one or more types of instructional technology. I chose to design a learning environment to help develop the creativity of K20 Center instructional design staff and build their self-efficacy in the area of presentation design. My design employed elements of gamification, including avatars and badging. I struggled with this project a bit, as my initial draft included more time in the classroom and less independent work. Ultimately, though, I feel that I was able to come up with a creative solution that was a good match for the topic at hand. I am not sure how well learners would receive this topic and what additional types of scaffolding or coaching they might need. If I had the opportunity to pilot the training with a small group of K20 Center employees, I feel that I could make some adjustments to significantly improve the effectiveness of the design.

## Moving Forward

In leaving graduate school and looking toward my career goals, I feel that I have a wide range of options. Narrowing them down to find the best fit will be my challenge. I can't recall any time, either going into or during my time at Stockton or OU, when I intended to work full-time as an instructional designer. Rather, I see my instructional design degree as adding tools, knowledge, and skills that I have wanted to develop in myself to be more well-rounded professional.

I see myself moving into a big-picture role that incorporates a wide range of the skills that I've developed across my education and career. I'm longing to be a leader and at this point, 15 years into my professional career, won't allow myself to settle for a job that does not put me on that path. I want to be a creative, strategic problem-solver and help companies operate more effectively and employees feel more happy, empowered, and productive in their work. Some of the key words I'd use to describe my areas of expertise would be "content strategy," "enterprise content management," "organizational effectiveness," "learning organization," "knowledge management,"

The Lean/Six Sigma green belt certification that I completed this year, the training in Agile methodologies Scrum Developer certification I completed just prior to returning to OU, and my study of knowledge management and its underlying concepts, including succession planning and transfer of knowledge all support my overall career goals.

I believe that companies need to be systematic about how they design processes and structures for managing knowledge, development, learning, and data. My training in instructional systems design has helped me learn to apply such a systematic approach. Employees need a roadmap to follow with clear guidelines. Buy-in is needed from the top down, but contribution is required from all levels. Employees need to be aware of the company's goals and the customer's processes and needs in order to recognize potential problems or pain points. And, employees also need to be given the latitude in their job roles, and without significant process or budget hurdles and red tape, to address those problems.

That all starts with hiring the right people, providing the needed training and supports during onboarding, and maintaining an atmosphere of learning, growth, and high achievement. Trusting people to do the right thing--building an environment that promotes intrinsic motivation and self-determination. Motivational and learning theory can be used as a basis for this. Giving individuals full ownership over projects that match well with their goals and interests as well as customer needs is also a good strategy. Allowing for fluidity and plan changes, incorporating feedback along the way.

Just because I'm completing a master's degree doesn't mean my learning journey is over. In order to achieve my career goals, one significant weakness that I need to address is my interpersonal communication skill and my ability to come across as reliable, knowledgeable, and trustworthy. Other learning opportunities that I'd like to pursue include certification as an organizational effectiveness consultant, entrepreneurship and business management training, and more formal user experience (UX) training. I may not find my dream job right away--in fact, no job will ever be perfect, but I can continue to make progress by setting high standards and always looking for opportunities that help me develop in target areas with my overall long-term goal in mind.