Reflective Piece

A JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN: REFLECTIONS FROM NOVICE INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGNERS ON IDENTIFYING THEIR PLACE WITHIN THE SOUTHERN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

Although the discipline of instructional design has been around for over four decades (Reiser, 2001) there is still confusion as to the role instructional designers play within the workplace. Gagne et al. (2005) emphasise the process of instruction when describing instructional design work while others take a broader view and include its more 'emergent' and practical realities (Sims & Koszalka, 2008; Drysdale, 2019). With the addition of different titles that may cover similar or overlapping remits, such as learning designer (MacLean & Scott, 2007, 2011), and identical titles which may conceal quite different actual tasking (as described in this article), instructional designers often face the challenge of having to explain their role and justify their interventions to colleagues within the organisation in which they work (Halupa, 2019; Miller & Stein, 2016; Mueller et al., 2022; Schwier et al., 2004).

At the Southern Institute of Technology (SIT) (a division of Aotearoa's national polytechnic, Te Pūkenga), until early 2021, instructional designers had mostly operated within the organisation's distance education division known as SIT2LRN. There, they worked in partnership with subject matter experts (SMEs) in preparing content for online delivery. Essentially, content was passed from the SME to the instructional designer for development – study guides, in the case of SIT2LRN. As the role underwent several iterations from instructional designer to content manager to programme operations manager, the core task of instructional design-informed content development was lost in the process and is now only evident in project-driven change such as in the re-design of SIT2LRN's environmental papers (see this article). In terms of the rest of the organisation, instructional design has always been subsumed into the role of full-time kaiako (teacher). For instance, in the initial rollout of blended delivery at SIT, an Information Technology Services (ITS) initiative led by E-Learning (a branch of ITS), no instructional designer support was provided, especially in the realm of content creation. From this, the need for such individuals was identified to scale-up the project; they would provide said support to reduce the workload of kaiako. In March 2021, two instructional designers (1 × 1.0 FTE and 1 × 0.6 FTE) who were new to the field, but who had been in education for at least a decade, were hired as part of E-Learning. A year later, E-Learning welcomed an additional instructional designer with expertise in digital content creation and primary teaching. Highlighted in Figure 1 are SIT's original core tasks and vision for instructional designers.

Since the establishment of the instructional design role within ITS, kaimahi (staff) filling this role have been proactively carving out and negotiating their own niche within the organisation. In exploring and navigating the operational culture of the institution and positioning themselves as advocates of the learners' ako (teaching and learning) experience, they have been seeking to establish the scope of instructional design at SIT, and how and where it overlaps with the remit of other stakeholders (for example, tutors) with similar goals. During this

process, they have experienced a mixture of setbacks and successes. Here, they aim to relay some strategies they have employed and some 'lessons learnt' through reflective practice in the hope that others involved in learning design may benefit from them in their own institutional context.

In preparation for this piece, instructional designers underwent critical reflection on key events since the start of their employment that they believe have shaped their identity as change agents within the organisation. Permission was sought and granted from stakeholders to discuss specific events and feedback obtained to help inform instructional designers' perspectives of these crucial moments.

Key Tasks as of January 2021	Key Tasks as of December 2022
• Aid in the training, development and recommendations of online course design.	• Aid in the training, development and recommendations of course design across a range of teaching and learning modes.
• Use pedagogical expertise to support subject matter experts in the creation of engaging learning activities and compelling course content.	• Use pedagogical expertise to support subject matter experts in the creation of engaging learning activities and compelling course content across face to face, blended, online, and flexible delivery.
• Apply tested instructional design theories, practices, and methods.	• Apply tested instructional design theories, practices, and methods.
• Support tutors and developers to ensure that materials received are fit for purpose.	• Support tutors and content creators to ensure that learning assets and materials are best suited to their context.
• Liaise and co-ordinate with tutors and programme managers to achieve timelines for development or redevelopment of courses.	• Liaise and co-ordinate with tutors and managers to achieve timelines for development or redevelopment of courses.
• Use materials from subject experts to design engaging and effective learning courses in the SIT Learning Management System.	• Provide learning design support to tutors to ensure consistency throughout a programme and across different programmes.
• Provide learning design support for all courses to ensure consistency throughout a programme and across different programmes.	• Coach and mentor tutors to adopt and apply best practice for their teaching and learning context.
• Upload, test and quality assure materials within the Learning Management System.	• Use content authoring tools and the LMS to develop and support the development of learning materials.
• Manage and maintain SIT's materials in the Document Management System.	• Support tutors to develop and deliver accessible, inclusive learning experiences appropriate to an Aotearoa New Zealand context.
	• Manage and maintain SIT's materials in the Document Management System.

Note: The ability to engage in research where appropriate has also been added to the latest version of the job description.

Figure 1. Key Tasks as described in SIT's Instructional Designer job description.

Boyd's OODA (Observation – Orientation – Decision – Action) loop (Ryder & Downs, 2022) was employed because of its focus on identifying where one is situated within their surroundings and consideration of the reciprocal nature of the relationship between individuals and their space. For one instructional designer, the OODA sequence was modified to better suit his logic with 'Orientation' occurring first and 'Observation' last; the remaining two adhered to the original order. Below are their accounts of how they have operated within and outside of their remits.

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN PERSPECTIVES

Persisting with incorporating Māori content – Balint's story

I joined ITS's E-Learning Team on the same day as Jerrylynn, and we were assigned our respective projects on our second day on the job. The brief from my manager was that I needed to work with SIT2LRN to re-design their course material for an Environmental Management qualification consisting of four papers. The aim was to make the learning material more interactive and appealing than the then current PDF Study Guide. In my process, I loosely followed the ADDIE method, an instructional design process that includes the following five steps: analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation (Gibbons, 2014). When I embarked on a journey of professional reflection, I decided to select one well-defined tasking to focus on. Through reflection, I was hoping to better understand the limitations of my mandate and capability as a change agent.

Orientation

Some months into my role, I discovered that the official title, some graduate outcomes, and the strategic purpose statement of the qualification that I was re-designing had recently changed: there was now more emphasis on rangatiratanga and the primacy of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, n.d.), which created an imperative for reflecting this shift in the course content as well. I also became more familiar with the institution's Māori Education Strategy, Goal Three of which asks kaimahi "to include Māori concepts and knowledge in programmes as appropriate that reflect a valuing and understanding of these for Māori learners; to incorporate manawhenua tikanga, knowledge and participation in programmes as appropriate" (Southern Institute of Technology, 2019, p. 13).

Around the time of my project starting, some institutional changes added a sense of urgency to this mandate. SIT's first General Manager of Māori Development was appointed. In her first report about the state of Māori visibility and culturally sustaining practices at SIT, she signalled the need for fast changes within the organisation so as to improve Māori student retention and satisfaction (Milne-Ihimaera, 2021).

Beyond SIT, the emergent working groups formulating the policy foundations of Te Pūkenga were producing similar 'status quo' reporting on the support and wellbeing of Māori students across the network. All this multi-layered institutional 'ferment' came to bear on my self-orientation with respect to incorporating (more) Māori perspectives and content in re-designed learning material.

Decision

I decided that, while I was not qualified to create or curate kaupapa Māori content, this project provided a unique opportunity to enhance the learning material, driven by a strong and multi-layered mandate, as discussed above. This outweighed my lack of formal qualification and became an issue of civic and professional responsibility. Although my role description states that I need to support subject matter experts in content creation, rather than act as the subject matter expert myself, I decided that I had to give this a go (karawhiua!). In the beginning, my goal was to find a collaborating subject matter expert.

Action

I reached out to the Māori Development Unit (MDU) to seek advice on their preferred way of having such content created and checked for accuracy and cultural appropriateness. I organised an in-person meeting with the relevant stakeholders in the hope that an institutional process can be drawn up for how everyone at SIT goes about fulfilling their Tiriti obligations in developing learning material with consideration and incorporation of mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) and tikanga Māori (correct procedure, custom, and practice). Immediate guidance was offered at this hui and I was able to involve the MDU in reviewing some draft material – the feedback received reassured me that I was on the right track and also prompted some edits. However, there was no resource for an actual content developer/subject matter expert to be assigned to this project, so I had no choice but to carry on curating and creating content myself and seek feedback from the MDU. This included sourcing content from well-established and respected sources that would have been reviewed by experts in te ao Māori before being published in the public realm and asking MDU to review and comment on iterative drafts.

Besides creating and reviewing content, I also sought the help of the MDU with reaching out to knowledge holders in the local Māori community on my behalf. These were community members with links to Murihiku mana whenua who I was hoping might be able to share their whakaaro for the students' benefit, or grant permission for content already available in the public domain to be used for instructional purposes. The MDU acknowledged that making these connections through them rather than contacting individuals directly was culturally more appropriate. The process was slow, however, for a couple of reasons. One was the limited availability of the people being sought out, especially for a kanohi-ki-te-kanohi (face-to-face) meeting involving all stakeholders. The other challenge had to do with MDU's role in managing multiple requests for the same people's time coming from other corners of the institution. MDU's plan was to help coordinate within SIT first and bring all tangata whenua and tangata Tiriti that shared an agenda (in this case, environmental management) together for a hui where connections can be made in person.

In the end, while not involving the originally identified community members with links to mana whenua, a hui around the environmental management agenda did take place, and I made professional connections with many of my own colleagues as well. Through my relationship with MDU, I was also invited to participate in a series of workshops aimed at prototyping what authentic Tiriti partnerships between the institution and mana whenua might look like.

Observation/Learning

While my hope for an institutionally defined process and guidance for how Māori content is meant to be developed did not materialise, some other, tangential benefits did: one of these was an established and active communication channel and good rapport with the MDU. Through this relationship, I gained more insight into the activities of the MDU, acquired an enhanced understanding of the priorities and cultural norms of local mana whenua, and became involved as tangata Tiriti in shaping policy settings that would later drive the kind of 'partnership-based' content creation that I originally set out to find guidance on.

I have learnt that although the resource that is available may not perfectly match project needs, unexpected benefits do arise from collaboration in unpredictable ways – and eventually, the original needs will also be met along the way.

> *Major learning: My advice to other instructional designers embarking on a similar pursuit is to create and maintain the conditions in which unpredictable benefits for the students may emerge – that is, reach out to stakeholders and collaborators, build trust and rapport, and stay curious about the work where their main interests lie. Look for opportunities to support what they do – offer value to them and you will gain value yourself. There is only so much that can be enabled by formal structures and workflows – for genuine partnership, you will need to cultivate relationships.*

Operating within the periphery: Jerrylynn's story

Whilst writing this piece, I came to the realisation that most of my journey as an instructional designer at SIT has been within the periphery of the expectations of the role. From the outset, I have been located within that space due to the nature of the project that was given to me at the start of my employment. Since then, we (E-Learning) have managed to realign the instructional designer role to reflect our practice and vision, which is to "support", "coach", and "mentor" kaiako as they transform their teaching practices. The story below describes how this change came to be.

The situation (Observation)

Within a week of joining SIT, I was tasked with the job of assisting Screen Arts kaiako with the transition to blended teaching from face-to-face (traditional) instruction. Essentially, the expectation was that the latter would be an additional mode offered within the School of Screen Arts, and that the development and facilitation work involved would be on top of what kaiako were already doing. As a result of several mistakes, misunderstandings, and 'out-of-the-box' proposals (mostly on my part), blended delivery did not quite align with SIT's vision of it. This led to confusion within the organisation about our product and apprehension around our design choices. Serendipitously, these choices ultimately facilitated the transition to Hybrid-Flexible (HyFlex) delivery (a multi-modal system where students are given the liberty to choose how they would like to participate in their lessons – traditionally, synchronously, and/or asynchronously (Beatty, 2019)) within the School, and across the institution. And so, the major problem that emerged from the pilot was how to roll out HyFlex delivery across the institution with limited people power. *What is the plan?* In the first year of the HyFlex rollout, I supported six Screen Arts kaiako; in this second year, E-Learning now is responsible for on-boarding an additional 17 kaiako from various departments.

The role (Orientation)

My role has always encroached on the remit of others within the organisation. As part of the pilot project and during the first year of HyFlex at SIT, I observed lessons of kaiako (reading through the learning resources, viewing recordings, monitoring the class communication platform for ākonga (learner) engagement, and providing feedback), provided debriefing sessions with kaiako, facilitated ad hoc tutorials when required, and evaluated the project (Manuel, 2022a; 2022b). The reason for my involvement in more of an academic support role was because tutors wanted full autonomy over the content creation aspect of their redesign; support with the technology and andragogy side of the delivery was what was needed. Despite the existence of the Academic Support Unit at SIT, I took on the job of providing that type of assistance, as it required expertise within my wheelhouse.

I worked closely with the Screen Arts programme manager to ensure that the School's vision for HyFlex was maintained by kaiako; at times this resulted in us being pitted against each other when views were contrasting and confusion as to who was responsible for 'policing' the vision. Prior to the appropriate people coming on board, I helped with troubleshooting technology issues. Additionally, I facilitated an Introduction to HyFlex workshop for Year 1 HyFlex students to help them make informed decisions about their participation mode, I drafted the first version of HyFlex information on the SIT website, and I have engaged in research – these latter tasks being outside of the scope of my role entirely. I have been a sounding board and a source of frustration. Many hats were worn, and I was embroiled in many aspects of this project in an effort to maintain its momentum.

The learning (Decision)

As we moved into the second year of HyFlex delivery at SIT, the need to devise a slightly different approach to on-boarding kaiako (due to volume) and to document our process became apparent. Mainly, I did not want to repeat the mistakes made from the previous year (in other words, overstepping boundaries). I captured this new process in what we termed the HyFlex Manual, which consists of a series of checklists outlining key tasks for

programme managers, kaiako, and instructional designers to perform and the sequence in which they must occur. Information on who to report specific information to in order to communicate the School's vision of HyFlex to other stakeholders was also included. The strength of this document lies in the explicit communication of the expectations of each stakeholder involved in this project. Because of my naiveté about what an instructional designer does, and the need to be helpful and keep the project moving along, I now recognise that many of the tasks I performed early on in my role should have been carried out by others. The hope is that this document will clearly delineate our boundaries.

> *Major learning: Formulate your overall process, document it in a way that stakeholders understand, and share it widely – be transparent.*

The outcome (Action)

The prospect of our team being shifted from ITS into a yet-to-be determined place within Te Pūkenga prompted us to examine who we are and where we fit within the larger organisation. Armed with a greater understanding of what we do, we scoured various instructional design job ads from other organisations within Aoteaora and contacted our counterparts from within the network. The results were unsurprising – we all do different things. As alluded to above, the project dictates the work of the instructional designer. What this entire experience has enabled us to do was to articulate our spin on what an instructional designer does and formally amend the 'Key Tasks' component of SIT's instructional designer job description (Figure 1) – we are operating within the periphery no longer.

HyFlex delivery at SIT – Katrina's story

I joined E-Learning in May 2022 after working as a kaiako in Primary and Early Childhood Education; I also have a lengthy background in Digital Arts and creating digital media. An important lesson I took away from classroom teaching and work with digital media was the importance of scaffolding learning and professional learning for all kaiako, especially when technology and trends change.

Observe

This year (2023), more kaiako have been coming on board with HyFlex delivery, so we needed to identify ways that we could continue to support kaiako and give them a place to refer to when we were not as available as we had been in the past. Taking our own knowledge of how people learn into consideration, and the need for learning materials to be presented in diverse ways, E-Learning created *HyFlex for Tutors (H4T)*. *H4T* is a self-paced course available in SIT's learning management system (LMS), Blackboard Ultra, which can be updated to service the growing and ever-changing landscape of e-learning and HyFlex delivery within the context of SIT. Associated with it is a Microsoft Teams Classroom. The bones of the course were based on a series of workshops that Jerrylynn delivered during the 2022 HyFlex roll out to the School of Screen Arts. *H4T* was created with the intention of being used as a model that other kaiako could base their Blackboard courses off. Developing the content for the course has allowed me to gain understanding on how tutors might create content and use the content creation tools that Blackboard offers. I was able to increase my knowledge of ways video, audio, imagery, text, and interactives could be used by a tutor to enhance the learning and engagement of their ākonga, and when they might use them for different purposes in their teaching.

Orient

To better orientate myself with the experience of a HyFlex kaiako, I went to work creating various modules within *H4T*. I developed my own way of working and tested the parameters and uses of the content creation tools available in Blackboard. I also looked at how other institutes used their LMS – gaining perspectives on others such as Canva, Moodle and iQualify. I wanted *H4T* to inform the support we deliver to current and new

kaiako that join the HyFlex community at SIT. Applying the knowledge gained of HyFlex delivery and the work of an instructional designer over the first year of working at SIT has been valuable to my journey. The considered approach by E-Learning has been guided by best practice in teaching and learning, literature, and the teaching and learning practices of kaiako we have observed along the way. The learning I took away from having my own simulated learning experience in building *H4T* has made me a more confident supporter to the kaiako who are using Blackboard to create their content and learning materials for the ākonga in front of them or those who are online.

Decide

Since the pilot in 2021 with one paper, we are now supporting seven faculties (roughly 20 kaiako) with delivering their classes in HyFlex. We collaborate with stakeholders to articulate their version of HyFlex and then offer support in the form of meetings, one-on-ones, workshops based on their needs, and andragogy for e-learning (and teaching and learning in general) that they want to develop. They can use *H4T* to design what HyFlex delivery looks like for them. Each faculty is delivering and interpreting HyFlex in their own way.

Act

We actively continue to update *H4T* based on the needs of our kaiako (it looks different now compared with how it was last year) and are experiencing increased engagement with kaiako in the associated Teams Classroom. Most of our communication with kaiako happens through Teams. Our overall aim is to create a HyFlex Community of Practice within our institute; we may be seeing the birth of it through the *H4T* Teams Classroom. Also, kaiako and programme managers even slightly interested in HyFlex teaching have been given access to the Blackboard course. This may help facilitate our vision of scaling HyFlex delivery upwards until it becomes the expected and normal way for ākonga to engage with their study.

> *Major learning: As an instructional designer, embrace each opportunity to gain experience from everyone and everything around you – be it building on skills you already have and applying learning to a new context. Everything will take you down a new path and these opportunities can allow you to support others to learn from you.*

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Often, organisations require instructional designers to possess expertise in all facets of the job from digital content creation to research, which is an unrealistic expectation especially for those new to instructional design. A plethora of frameworks (Gibbons et al., 2014) and research (Bodily et al., 2019) exists to guide the inexperienced through managing the design process; however, best practices do not always translate to productive work in real life. What is needed are more stories from those on the ground to help others understand and navigate their own reality. Schwier et al. (2004) claim that much of the tacit knowledge on instructional design has been kept private due to the limited opportunities to share this information. Even though this was the sentiment nearly 20 years ago, for Aotearoa the belief still rings true today: only one publication on the novice instructional design experience exists (Nichols & Meuleman, 2017), there are few learning opportunities (in other words, instructional and learning design qualifications) where those new to the profession can interact, and no active nationwide communities of practice outside of these experiences. And so, the stories presented here serve to publicly add to the paucity of information on the diverse practices of instructional designers within New Zealand.

In no way do we assert that our experiences are representative of the instructional designer work performed across the country. However, we do recognise shared challenges with those described in the literature. These include struggles with stakeholder engagement (Mueller et al., 2022) and being underutilised due to our association with IT (Miller & Stein, 2016; Xie et al., 2021). Because the instructional designer role has traditionally

been isolated within specific departments (Gibbons, 2014), as in the case for SIT, it is not surprising that feelings of suspicion in what we do arise. Our stories demonstrate that partnerships may be built upon whanaungatanga, transparency, and empathy; and that strong commitments to the instructional design profession, our institution, and wider society in addition to fulfilling our obligations to our stakeholders may lead to organisational change (Campbell et al., 2009). Our next step is to determine how those around us (colleagues, managers, and Te Pūkenga leaders) view our roles so that we can begin the work of aligning all views in the interest of delivering the best value we can for ākonga.

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