Developing a reflective practice in instructional design

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Abstract

It is generally accepted as true that nobody is an expert from the very first try. However, most people expect that an adequate amount of years of experience result in building expertise. They may be right, especially if those years were spent not only acting and experimenting, but also reflecting on the actions and learning from these reflections.

This study, grounded in the author's everyday practice, is aiming to explore how instructional designers of online courses can be supported by using Web 2.0 tools to develop a reflective practice, and to form a community where they can exchange ideas, confront theories, identify problems and find solutions.

The group is formed by people with backgrounds more or less connected to education, such as former trainers, school counsellors, psychologists, project managers, technical writers, graduates in public administration, etc. Having neither formal training in instructional design, nor experience in such a domain, they have no other choice than learn on the job.

The approach taken is insider action research (AR), as the author has a responsibility concerning the work quality and productivity of instructional designers. Each AR cycle builds on the findings from the previous one, and enlarges the scale of the study while focusing the investigation. The pragmatic goal of the project is to succeed in building a community of practitioners that is autonomous, and has a core that is solid enough to integrate newcomers. The first action research cycle was exploratory and identified early issues of interest. The second cycle is currently in the analysis phase. The third cycle will run in 2012 based on the findings of the current one.

The contribution this study seeks to make is to place knowledge about collective reflection, public vs. personal theories, and use of blogs as learning journals into the context of workplace learning and professional development with the goal to improve practice. Through this study, I aim to: (1) improve my understanding of the process of developing as a professional in the workplace, particularly on developing reflective skills, (2) analyse the impact of support actions and select the ones that facilitate the formation of a community of practice among instructional designers, and (3) identify potential differences of approach in offering and receiving support according to personal factors such as personal experience and other factors that may emerge.

Keywords

Reflective practice, instructional design, blog, action research, workplace learning.

Research Context

The present research is placed in the context of the professional practice of instructional designers working in Romania for a company providing e-learning solutions and content for children and adults in various settings, such as formal education, public administration, and industry. Instructional designers are responsible for the design of e-learning courses and applications based on needs analysis results and materials provided by subject-matter experts. Since in Romania educational options to train as an instructional designer are scarce, the professional development of instructional designers relies heavily on on-the-job training.

Methodology

The aim of the study is to investigate how instructional designers can be assisted to develop as reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983) and form a community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

The research questions are:

- How can Web 2.0 tools facilitate the development of reflective skills of instructional designers?
- How can the improvement of reflective skills be supported within the organizational context?
- What is the difference between novice and experienced practitioners concerning reflective skills and the process of improving them?
- How can collective reflection support the formation of a community of practice?

The project consists of at least three cycles of action research, each cycle being based on the findings and reflections of the previous one. The first cycle took place in December 2010 - January 2011, the second cycle is currently in the reflection phase, and the third cycle will begin in March 2012. The scope of the cycles is growing progressively, as the results become more relevant and reliable.

Preliminary Findings

During the first cycle of action research, a shared blog was set up for a group of 4 instructional designers. Data from interviews and analysis of blog entries suggested that experienced and novice professionals used the blog differently. Participants with more experience wrote more posts and commented more on others' posts, while participants with less experience read more and were more reluctant to write. Another difference was in the focus of the posts. While participants with more experience found more useful to focus on general themes relevant to their job, the ones with less experience preferred to link their posts to specific external events. It is noteworthy that the difference was not made by experience on the instructional designer job, but by the general work experience of the participant, regardless of their previous work domain. Other results pointed to a need to establish guidelines and procedures in the use of the blog, in order to be a legitimate job activity, carrying both the responsibility to do it, and bringing acknowledgment if it's done. Issues concerning evaluations of reflective skills were not addressed in the first cycle. Reflection was taken to mean exploring experience to gain new understandings (Boud, Keogh, and Walker, 1985). Self-reporting was the only method used to assess whether any learning happened as a result of the reflections on the blog.

The second cycle included 13 participants and covered the period August - November 2011. Instead of prompting participants to write on the blog, a regular weekly workshop was organized, to trigger the posts on the blog, and at the same time to allow themes and topics to emerge. Preliminary conclusions point to the fact that participation on the blog is decreasing with time, even if people were actively involved in the workshops and identified them as useful, so the workshop alone cannot sustain the involvement. Analysis of blog posts revealed that most posts were reflections on content, few concerned the process, and none of the posts examined the assumptions (Mezirow, 1998). Analysis of interviews data is ongoing at the moment, to investigate the collective aspect of reflecting on a shared blog and identify difficulties with expressing personal theories (Griffiths and Tann, 1992).

The third cycle will set up actions in addition to the workshop to use the difference in participation and approach between novices and more experienced persons in order to support the novices to express and confront their personal theories. The structure of the workshop will also be revised to encourage a more critical reflection on experience.

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