

# Training Instructional Designers as Edupreneurs

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## Abstract

This paper offers a novel approach to training instructional designers within the context of a student-led service center, Learning Design Solutions (LearnDS). It describes a unique milieu for graduate students to practice and sharpen their instructional design, leadership, and entrepreneurial skills. Through LearnDS, members and collaborators engage in contracted projects that provide them with opportunities to solve educational problems and become instructional designers, leaders, and edupreneurs (educators + entrepreneurs).

**Descriptors:** Instructional Design, Edupreneurism

## Background

Learning Design Solutions (LearnDS), a self-supported, student-led, service center at Iowa State University, grew out of an advanced instructional design course in which students worked on real-world projects with clients from organizations in the community. The focal learning activity of the course was to be part of a multi-team instructional consulting company designed to simulate a small firm that provided professional-level services free of charge. Students, taking on the roles of technology consultants, worked with both university clients and organizations within the community (e.g., government agencies, schools, and healthcare providers). However, the demand for instructional design work was greater (dozens per year) than could be accommodated by the single advanced instructional design course offered only during the spring semester. In order to meet the needs of the community, the course instructor and a group of graduate students envisioned a center that could provide instructional design services year round. This led to the creation of LearnDS, which is located within the Center for Technology in Learning and Teaching, in the School of Education at Iowa State University.

As a service center LearnDS is able to offer educational technology consulting services to internal Iowa State University clients as well as external clients from business and industry, both within and outside of the local community. LearnDS, as a service center at a non-profit institution of higher education, operates on a break-even basis. The per hour rate for LearnDS services is calculated each year based on the anticipated number of projects that will be contracted and the anticipated costs to both keep LearnDS running and to complete the number of contracted projects anticipated. The organization is self-sustaining, where the revenue that is generated through contracted projects covers both the organizational expenses and the expenses that are incurred to complete the contracted projects.

The contracts for each project are drafted after an initial meeting with the prospective client. The draft contract, which contains an outline of the phases of the project, the deliverables, the number of hours that will be needed per phase, and the per hour rate for services, is given to the prospective client. Once the draft contract has been signed by both the prospective client and the LearnDS representative it is a completed contract and the instructional design and development work begins. At this point students are hired, on an hourly basis, to work on the contracted project. LearnDS members and collaborators are selected first based on their skills and availability. Additional students with specific skills are also hired on an hourly basis to complete components of projects.

This combination of education and entrepreneurship allows collaborators and members of LearnDS to develop into instructional designers and edupreneurs. Within this context students approach educational problems from an entrepreneurial perspective. This paper presents a reflective case of this novel approach to instructional design training.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In order to address the increasing need for instructional design services, and to train instructional designers capable of identifying, addressing, and solving ill-structured educational problems, LearnDS embraces an enterprise-based curriculum (Correia, 2013) that is learner-centered and stands on the pillars of experiential learning, leadership and entrepreneurship. Utilizing the Experiential Learning Framework (Kolb, 1984), LearnDS provides authentic experiences through which graduate students learn about and develop instructional design, entrepreneurship, and leadership skills. Transforming their traditional graduate student experiences with real-world projects allows students to build their knowledge of instructional design, entrepreneurship, and leadership, internalize what they've learned, and to serve as experts in instructional design. LearnDS provides a non-hierarchical working environment in which students are encouraged to take on leadership roles and serve as experts in instructional design --crucial experiences necessary to prepare students for success in their professional careers. Recognizing the importance of integrating entrepreneurial activities into the curriculum, LearnDS also strives to engage students in learning experiences that help them develop an entrepreneurial mindset and capabilities (Morris, 1998). With an entrepreneurial mindset, graduate students become better prepared to identify educational opportunities and challenges, and to tackle instructional design challenges in an innovative way. LearnDS encourages students to become not only instructional designers, but also edupreneurs who are passionate solving about educational problems, equipped with the skills necessary to face the challenges of the continuously evolving field of education, and who can easily adapt to new landscapes of learning and teaching. LearnDS has become the venue for connecting real life experiences and the academic knowledge gained about instructional design.

Within this framework, edupreneurs are "self-motivated learners/members of an enterprise who can recognize opportunities and take action on complex educational problems while aiming to create social value, financial value, and/or social benefits" (Correia, 2014, p. 115). They are eager to identify educational problems, approach them as challenges to overcome, and address those challenges in a way that is innovative and unexpected. In the case of instructional design, edupreneurism involves recognizing and evaluating complex educational problems, taking risks to propose alternative but creative solutions, assess the needs and costs associated with an educational design problem, and leverage the available resources and capabilities to maximize the impact of instructional design. In this sense, instructional design is one of the most apt venues through which an entrepreneurial mindset can be brought into education.

### **Reflections of Edupreneurs**

The members and collaborators of LearnDS continuously reflect on their work and experience within the organization. This part of the daily practice. Following are excerpts of their reflections on their involvement with the organization. Pseudonyms are used throughout this proposal.

John joined LearnDS as the Research and Development Manager. Reflecting on his experience with LearnDS, John states:

I joined LearnDS to work in a vivid, collaborative environment where I can sharpen my leadership and entrepreneurial skills. As a social entrepreneur, I was impressed by LearnDS' commitment to contribute to the community by addressing and solving instructional issues. Within my capacity as the R&D Manager of LearnDS, I have taken on leadership responsibilities to keep the organization running, overseeing projects, writing contracts, meeting and contracting with clients, which I think will be beneficial for my future career as a faculty member. My association with LearnDS has given me the chance to interact closely with potential clients, listen to their needs and address their questions. In that sense, I strongly believe that LearnDS has greatly helped me practice and enhance my interpersonal skills. Moreover, my involvement with LearnDS has provided me with valuable insight into how to manage and run an organization within the context of a non-profit university in the U.S., thereby enabling me to have a better understanding of how business works in the U.S. In the near future, I expect to actively engage in overseeing projects and thus improve my project and crisis management skills.

Mark, a PhD student in Applied Linguistics & Technology, reported the real-world experiences a benefit of joining LearnDS:

As a language teacher and researcher of applied linguistics, I always have a strong passion to adopt and apply instructional technology into my teaching and research. When it comes to making it in the real world, knowledge and experience should go hand-in-hand. In this sense, LearnDS is a perfect arena for me to gain valuable hands-on experiences of instructional design and their implementation in the real world. Another intriguing characteristics of LearnDS is the fact that this organization has been led by graduate students and also guided by faculty members. This unique feature of the organization expects active participation and contribution to the community and promotes peer learning for instructional design and its practice among the members and collaborators. After I earn my PhD, I intend to become a faculty member with research interests of task-based language teaching and testing; language program development; and language program evaluation. As my research interests are closely related to the use of technology, I hope to gain more from theory to practice experiences of instructional design from LearnDS. Besides, grant writing experience and leadership skills are also important and necessary assets for me to become a well-prepared faculty member.

Mariana, a recent collaborator of LearnDS, articulates why she joined LearnDS:

My work as a language teacher embraces a wide range of activities, including course and class material design. I have always been fascinated with the incorporation of technology in the classroom as way to bring more interaction and context to the topics studied. The synergy that exists between theory and practice has intrigued me a lot and that it led me to pursue a PhD in Curriculum and Instructional Technology at Iowa State University. My personal approach in my studies is to try to find connections between the scholarly work and the practice world. I learned about LearnDS in my first semester and I found it the perfect match for my interests. I am eager to get involved in real-life tasks where I can experience first-hand how this synergy of knowledge intersects in all the phases of the instructional design. Being a collaborator in this organization will provide me with instructional design knowledge and experience, with improvement and refinement of my communication skills, and with development of entrepreneur and leadership skills, which are paramount in working with instructional design projects. Last but not least, my involvement in LearnDS will definitely give me the opportunity to work collaboratively with other members and nurture this organization with our experiences, suggestions and initiatives. Besides the professional experience that I can get through this organization, what appealed to me was also the fact that this is an organization with clear open minds, creativity and strong commitment for seeking the best of everything. Being part of LearnDS will be a rich and solid ground to trigger my professional career into a faculty position in which I can apply what I have learned.

Emaa, a Master's student in the School of Education specializing in Curriculum and Instructional Technology (CIT), explains her reasons for joining LearnDS:

Entrepreneurship has always intrigued me and is an aspect which I think highly of simply because the lessons learned in an entrepreneurial venture by far exceeds the four walls of a classroom. This, coupled with instructional design, made LearnDS the most promising and enriching hands-on educational experiences that I could get. I wanted to gain valuable expertise in real-life instructional design projects, from its conception to completion, which would definitely give me an edge over others as I work towards my career goal of working as an instructional designer. The various aspects of running an entrepreneurial venture starting from creating various operational documents and artifacts, promotion, contract negotiation to project acquisition and then finally development is a learning experience all the way. These initial phases keep the members of LearnDS on their toes, which in a traditional classroom environment would have meant long periods of waiting before the actual design and development work is undertaken.

I hope to continue to be a part of this innovative endeavor and contribute to the successful completion of projects, provide constructive criticism and input, to make LearnDS an exemplary initiative in teaching and learning.

Allison, a PhD student in the School of Education with a specialization in CIT, describes her experience with LearnDS as follows:

As a PhD student, I see myself as a researcher and faculty member in the near future. I know that how to write a grant proposal is going to be an important part of my job. Although a PhD education teaches me the theory and application in the field, I believe there is a huge gap between the education that we receive in

the graduate school and the real world. Thus, the main driving force for me to join Learn DS was to gain experience by implementing my knowledge base to the real life projects and work with professionals in the organization a mentor and mentee relationship. Furthermore, as a future faculty, I am also eager to learn about the initial contact with the client, contract writing, and budgeting processes. The time I spent in past two years as a member of LearnDS group gave me several chances to observe the grant writing process.

### **Conclusions**

LearnDS offers a novel approach to training graduate students to be not only instructional designers, but edupreneurs. Through LearnDS students accumulate real-world experiences designing effective learning environments, leading others, and running a business-like organization.

As edupreneurs LearnDS members and collaborators strive to address educational problems through an entrepreneurial perspective. They serve as leaders within their community to promote the impact of instructional design while sharpening their entrepreneurial skills and grow as professionals. Instructional design is the applied field that allows to put into action ways to bring leadership and entrepreneurship to the foreground.

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